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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH, 1963

Vol. 12, No. 4

A COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

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by Q. PATRICK

Sudden death wore a cloak of mystery, on a sleety night in New York. Then—terror took on a new dimension amidst the snow and ice of a winter wonderland 2 to 54

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DEATH RIDES THE SKI-TOW

The macabre adventures of Peter Duluth, famed theatrical producer, who became murder bait the moment he spoke to the stranger in the mink coat.

by Q. PATRICK

IT WAS ONE of those mean city February nights. A wet, almost sleet like snow, which had been falling since sundown, was spreading a thin glaze over the darkened store windows. I resented upper Madison Avenue. I resented the snow sneaking down my back and spilling over into my shoes. I resented it for being three o'clock in the morning. Particularly I resented Mrs. Ingoldsby for dragging me to an after-theatre party on east ninety-sixth

street, and then snitching the only taxi in sight and not waiting for me; leaving me to fend for myself.

Not that I should have resented Mrs. Ingoldsby, since she was graciously backing my new production. But I did.

I was not strictly sober.

We had Madison Avenue to ourselves, the snow and I. I wished I was up skiing in New England, where there was some point to snow. A block ahead a single neon

AN EXCITING SHORT SUSPENSE NOVEL



CAST OF CHARACTERS

PETER DULUTH
Theatrical producer

IRIS DULUTH *His wife*

DEREK HUYSMANS
Rich diamond merchant

JULIANA GUILDER
Actress

STEPHEN DORN
Ski enthusiast

DICKIE SWANSON
His friend

ALESSANDRO *A gunman*

GEORGE ANSTEY
HILDA PURVIS
Private investigators

AMANDA BELL
GLORIA WEST
Theatrical blondes

MRS. INGOLDSBY
Wealthy woman

light gleamed forlornly over an all-night snack bar.

I made for it. Maybe I could telephone for a taxi. Maybe black coffee would make a little more dignified my homecoming to Iris, who had exercised her wifely prerogative and reneged on the party with an imaginary headache. Certainly there would be company.

You can get plenty lonely alone on a dark, late, empty New York night. Lonely—and scary. You get the feeling anything could happen.

I was just starting down the block when the girl in the fur coat came out of the snack bar. She paused a moment under the neon sign, staring down Madison Avenue away from me. Then she whipped around, saw me, and came running through the snow toward me. She came right up to me, standing squarely in front of me.

"Please, please—" she said desperately, and then her voice went away in a little whimper.

She was a blonde. Pretty, but had been prettier five years ago. The coat was mink. A scarf, covering her hair, was knotted under her chin. An evening gown showed under the coat. I wasn't too tight to see there was terror in her eyes, real, mortal terror.

"You! Whoever you are. You've got to help me." She glanced shudderingly over her shoulder. That was the first time I saw the car, saw its headlights creeping up Madison Avenue toward us.

With a quick, convulsive gesture the girl pulled me into a dark doorway and thrust something into my hand. "You'll be paid anything you ask if you take this and—" She pulled an envelope out of her pocket. "Take it and this letter to the address here on the envelope. Take it at once. Whatever happens—"

She glanced out of the doorway, stark fear in her eyes. The car was closer, coming slowly, relentlessly, as if its driver were scanning every inch of the sidewalk for something or someone.

I took the letter stupidly. I stared at the other thing she had pressed into my hand. I knew then that I must be much drunker than I thought. Because the thing in my hand, wrapped in a paper napkin, was a hot dog—a mundane frankfurter.

The drone of the car engine, crazily sinister, was the only sound in that drugged, snow-blanketed drab world.

"Here! Here are the keys to the apartment. George may not be home yet, and, if he isn't, wait there for him. Wait!" The girl pushed keys into my hand. "Tell him they know. Tell him they're out to get us. That there's danger, terrible danger. Tell—"

The car was almost directly opposite us now. It slowed almost to a standstill. Suddenly, a man's voice from inside called, "There she is!"

The girl stood there pressed against the wall by my side, shiver-

ing. Then the door of the car opened. She gave a wild little sob, broke away, dashed down the steps, and started running pointlessly off up Madison Avenue.

Like a hound dog unleashed, the car roared forward. She was running toward the corner, trying to get into the side street. The scarf over her head fluttered in the snow. She reached the hydrant, zigzagging. The car had passed me and was abreast of her. She looked at it wildly and screamed.

Then, with the scream, the sound of a shot barked. One shot and then another. The girl staggered sideways. Her arms were flung up over her head. She crumpled and fell, sprawling face downward in the snow. I could see her skirt, trailed over the snow—scarlet.

The car was still there, a gray, low-slung sedan. But I didn't think about it. You don't think about things at moments like that. I stuffed the hot dog, the keys, and the envelope in my overcoat pocket and started running forward toward the girl. It was madness, of course. I realized it just in time as the car ground into reverse and started backing.

"That guy was with her!"

I threw myself down on the snowy sidewalk only a split second before they fired at me. But I couldn't stay there flat on the sidewalk.

I pushed myself up. Dodging, running doubled up, I sprinted



toward a dark doorway. I leaped up the steps and pressed myself against the inside wall of the porch. A second bullet whistled past me, splintering the glass in the front door behind me.

They would have got me if New York hadn't been New York. Already windows were springing into light across the street. I heard someone shouting and running. Fairly far away I heard a piercing police whistle. In those few seconds Madison Avenue had come to life.

The car paused murderously a moment, directly outside my doorway. I had a glimpse of two vague male faces inside. I couldn't see the number. Snow clogged it. Then, with a screeching of gears, it gathered speed and shot away.

I was alone in the doorway. My heart was pounding. Under the street lamp at the corner, I could see the girl, sprawled there in the snow, a heap of scarlet and mink, small, pitiful, somehow unquestionably dead.

I started to the head of the steps to go to her. Then the people began to come. A woman with a man's camel's-hair overcoat over pajamas; a man, bald and bareheaded, wearing an apron; a workman in blue jeans; two little old people, clinging to each other—all of them converging on the corner, grouping around the girl, shouting, fussing.

If I hadn't been drinking I wouldn't have done what I did then. But suddenly, stupidly, I couldn't take it any more. Lurid visions rose up in my mind—visions of newspaper headlines: *Peter Duluth, well-known theatrical producer, involved in murder of girl on Madison Avenue*; visions of Mrs. Ingoldsby whisking away her backing from my new show, visions of Iris suspicious, estranged, hurtling me into the divorce court.

All I wanted, in my shaken, befuddled state, was to get away, to pretend this crazy thing hadn't happened. So I didn't make a move. I waited there in the doorway, choosing my moment. Then I slipped down into the snow, heading away from that little excited cluster at the street corner.

I walked out on that poor, dead blonde.

GUILT ONLY CAME to me when I was safely out of the way in a bar on Lexington Avenue. Guilt and anger. Another, much-needed Scotch and soda had given me Dutch courage, and I felt bitter in-

dignation against those unknown men in the gray sedan who had tried to kill me.

I felt sorry for the blonde, too, and ashamed of my desertion. I wanted to make amends. And there was an obvious way to make amends and also to avenge those bullets that had whizzed past my ear.

The girl had been trying to get something through to someone called George, something important enough to the men in the gray sedan for them to have shot her dead. She'd made a dying request. Okay. I'd take the message to George—whatever it involved.

I went into a booth, where I could be alone. I took the hot dog out of my pocket. There it was, a perfectly bona fide hot dog in a roll. That was too difficult for me. I stuffed it back and took out the letter.

It was a white, cheap envelope and written on it in a large, shaky hand, was:

*Mr. George Anstey,
135A East 69th Street,
New York City.*

That was George, then. And that was my destination. I turned the envelope over. It wasn't stuck down properly. I thought I had a right to open it. I did. There was a folded sheet of paper inside. I unfolded it and stared at it.

It said in five, concise words:

*Nuts to you, Alessandro.
Hilda.*

That helped a lot!

I folded the paper again and put it back in the envelope. I stuck the flap down the way it was supposed to be. I put the letter back in my pocket. For a moment I just stood there in the booth. Then I went through the bar to a phone and called Iris.

"Darling, I'm late."

"Yes, darling, you are."

"And I'm going to be later, because I've got a little errand to run for a friend."

"Blonde or brunette?" asked Iris.

"Blonde," I said. And then, trying to make it sound better: "She's dead."

I rang off. By a miracle I found a taxi. It took me to 135A East 69th Street.

I paid the taxi off and looked at the house. It was just an ordinary old brownstone house made over into apartments. Very run-of-the-mill. No lights showed in the windows. There wasn't a hall light, either.

I took out the keys Hilda had given me. One for the outside door, one for the apartment door, presumably.

I walked up the steps. I looked around, but there was no one on the street. No gray, low-slung sedan.

I had to light a match to read the names on the buzzers. I saw, "GEORGE ANSTEY: APT. 4." I

thought about ringing the buzzer, but decided against it. If the wrong person was in the apartment there was no point in heralding my approach.

One of the keys opened the front door. It was just light enough to see stairs stretching up. I found the banisters and, guiding myself, started as softly as I could up to Apartment 4. George had the penthouse apartment. I lit a match. I was in a small, dreary hallway. There was only one door. Before the match flickered out, I saw the card: *George Anstey*.

No light came out from under the door. I remembered what Hilda had said about the possible late home-coming of her husband. That made me less cautious as I struck another match and fumbled the second key into the lock. I made quite a racket.

The door opened inward onto darkness. I stepped across the threshold, and instantly a light was snapped on—not by me.

I blinked at a rather meager living-room-office with a flat-topped desk and filing cabinets. Standing by the desk, a reading lamp at his side, was a young man with a swagger overcoat open at the front. There was snow on his shoulders that hadn't all melted, and he was covering me with a revolver gripped in a gloved hand.

I wished I hadn't come. As I stared at the revolver I tried to make my mind work. He had snow on

his shoulders. That meant he had only just arrived. He hadn't taken off his coat. That meant he didn't live there. He was obviously South European. That meant his name probably wasn't George Anstey. He had been waiting in the dark with a revolver, waiting for someone to come. That meant . . .

Allesandro, I thought. And I felt something prickling at the back of my neck. He was glowering at me, surlily, arrogantly. "Who are you?" he said.

"Just a pal of George's." I tried to grin. "Good old George. Just dropped in for a quick one. Don't mind me."

"You came in with a key."

"A key? Oh, yes, sure. George gave me one. I'm from out of town. He lets me shake down here." And then, quite stupidly and drunkenly, I added, "I'm okay, Alessandro."

That was a fatal mistake. When I said his name he came at me with the revolver. We went into a clinch. More by luck than by judgment, I knocked the gun out of his hand. I made a lousy swing at his jaw, and missed. I hadn't a prayer then. I saw his face, very close and smiling a contented smile of anticipation. Then I felt his left fist crash into my face.

II

I OPENED MY eyes onto darkness. I was extremely sober, remembering every incident that had hap-

pened and regretting them all. I was lying on my back on the floor. I was gripping something in my right hand. I didn't pay it much attention. My nose was very painful. I raised my left hand to it gingerly. It wasn't broken, just swollen.

I didn't feel very secure lying there in the dark. I pushed myself up, not letting go of whatever it was in my hand. Was I still in George Anstey's apartment or had they taken me somewhere else? I didn't even know that.

I stood still in the darkness, thinking of Alessandro. The pale pattern of the window gave my my bearings. I moved toward it, stumbling against furniture. If I was in Anstey's apartment, there had been a light on the desk and the desk had been by the window. I reached the window, my hands outstretched in front of me. My fingers encountered the smooth surface of the desk top. I fumbled, finally found a light, and switched it on.

I stared at the thing in my hand. It was a heavy brass candlestick. It didn't mean much to me—not at first. But it meant something with a vengeance the instant I saw the darkly gleaming blood on the end of it.

I put it down quickly and looked around. I had to cling to the desk to steady myself. Very slowly I made myself think, *"I am Peter Duluth, fairly well-known Broadway figure. This is New York City, New York State, United States of America. Iris*

is at home waiting for me. Everything is going to be all right."

That helped a bit, but not too much.

Because, just inside the door, slumped over the worn, red carpet, was the body of a man I had never seen before. A thin, wiry man in a crumpled tuxedo, with yellowish hair and a pale, thin profile. There was blood on his hair from a wound back of his left ear.

I stared dazedly at him and then at the candlestick I had been holding. It wasn't hard to put one and one together. I dropped on my knees at his side and felt his pulse, then realized how futile that was. I had only had to look at him to know that he was dead.

Because I was reacting mechanically, I started running through his pockets for something that could identify him. It didn't take long. There was a bunch of cards in his wallet. They read: GEORGE ANSTEY—HILDA PURVIS—*Private Investigators*. And then the address and telephone number.

So this was George Anstey. I thought of the blonde, who had once been prettier, stumbling through the snow, her scarf fluttering—Hilda Purvis!

This hadn't been a lucky night for George and Hilda. It wasn't lucky for me, either.

I hadn't the slightest idea what to do, because I was an averagely respectable citizen and nothing even remotely like this had ever hap-

pened to me before. All the time, my mind was on coping logically with the facts.

George Anstey must have come home while I was lying unconscious on the floor. Alessandro had been waiting behind the door with the candlestick. As Anstey let himself in, Alessandro had bopped him, and that had been curtains for George.

I started thinking how very close I had been to having the same thing happen to me. That knocked out what little control I had left. I had to get out of his place, quickly.

I ran to the door, skirting Anstey's body. I turned the handle and pulled.

The door didn't move.

I tugged again wildly. Nothing happened. It had been bolted or somehow successfully jammed from the outside.

Being locked in a strange apartment with a strange corpse is a singularly unattractive experience. I thought of my fingerprints on the candlestick and broke into a cold sweat. Maybe Alessandro hadn't been so dumb, after all. He'd shut me in and my fingerprints were on the body, and all over the place.

What if Alessandro had called the police from a phone booth? What if they arrived at any minute now? Could I explain my presence? How could I hope to make the police accept a story which I myself hadn't really been able to believe yet?

In a kind of nervous crisis, I thought about smashing the door

open and making my escape. But I didn't dare. Someone might hear. I couldn't risk being caught up with until I was a lot steadier.

I tried to think of it as a play, something impersonal in which I was only one of several actors. George Anstey and Hilda Purvis had been private investigators. Judging from the tacky apartment-office, they had been pretty small time, and, judging from the way Anstey looked, pretty shady as well. Probably playing a keyhole racket for the pickings.

But this time, either working alone or hired by someone else, they'd obviously run up against something big—something involving my pal Alessandro and my other unknown pals in the gray, low-slung car.

That was clear enough. Just as it was clearer that Alessandro and his boy friends had resented their meddling, to the extent of filling Hilda with lead and cracking George's skull with a candlestick.

But what of my role? Presumably tonight Hilda had stumbled upon some really vital information. She knew the gray car was after her and she couldn't get in touch with George. So she stopped the first sucker she ran up against on the street—which had been me—and had passed the buck on to him.

But what had the buck been? A letter to George and a hot dog. I'd read the letter, with its tense, derisive message to Alessandro. Surely

it had contained no vital information. Unless it was in code. I felt in my overcoat pocket. I wanted to read the message through again.

The hot dog was still there in a mess of napkin and crumbled roll. But the letter had gone. Alessandro had taken it, of course. In spite of myself, my eyes shifted to George Anstey lying there unpleasantly dead in front of me. I felt sick.

Hilda had got it all wrong. The note should have read, *Nuts to you, George and Hilda*. There might have been a P. S. about Peter Duluth, too.

It shows how dumb you can be if you try. It was only then, when the truth was screaming itself at me, that I thought of the hot dog. Beautiful women in mortal terror of death, don't press hot dogs into the hands of strangers without a purpose.

Feverishly I pulled the hot dog, with its broken wrapping or roll, out of my pocket. I took the frankfurter between finger and thumb. It had been boiled, not split and fried. I turned it around. I saw what I should have seen from the start—a small, uneven slit in the skin. And, just visible sticking out of it, a tiny piece of paper.

I pulled the paper out. Clearly visible in small, penciled writing, were the words: SWITCHED FROM SKI-FLYER N. H. TO SKI-MONARCH VT. 8:30 TOMORROW GRAND CENTRAL. TRANSFER 10 A.M. NORTHERN FOOT OF RAMP.



That cryptic message meant nothing to me. I had no idea what had been switched from the Ski-Flyer to the Ski-Monarch ski-train nor what transfer was going to take place at the northern foot of what ramp. But I thought I saw exactly what had been in Hilda's mind when she stopped me on the street. And my sympathy for her sorry fate dwindled considerably.

Hilda must have known there was a good chance that Alessandro would be waiting in Anstey's apartment. She was desperately keen for Anstey to get the dope about the ski-train, but she was equally keen to save his life. She knew he might be out. So she gave me keys to the apartment, the phony note, and the hot dog.

I was to have been the sacrificial goat. My function had been to ar-

rive at the apartment before Anstey returned, open the door with the key as only the owner would do, and be bopped over the head in mistake for George.

Alessandro, discovering he had killed the wrong man, wouldn't have dared hang around with a corpse waiting for Anstey. He would have decamped, waiting only to search me. The letter would have deflected him from the hot dog. He would have dashed off thinking he'd got the information. *Nuts to you, Alessandro.* Very apt.

Later George would have arrived home unmolested. True, it would have been uncomfortable to find a corpse in his apartment, but less uncomfortable than being the corpse himself. And, since Hilda and George had probably used the hot dog as a carrier pigeon before, he would have got the information, too.

Very smart of Hilda. I shuddered when I thought how nearly her plan had succeeded.

I stared down again at the note. The ramp meant nothing. A ramp in Grand Central? But the Ski-Monarch meant a lot. Iris and I, who were crazy about skiing, had taken it last year. A very de luxe trip to Greenfield, Vermont, almost on the Canadian border, where two days were spent at the swanky Mountain Inn at the foot of the celebrated Hurricane Trail.

How on earth was the Ski-Monarch mixed up with this?

Instinctively, because I had read detective stories and was clue-conscious, I slipped the message back into the frankfurter, wrapped the whole thing in a piece of paper, and put it into my pocket. One didn't destroy clues. Exhibit A, I thought.

And now that I knew more or less what I was up against I felt a lot better. Better and mad—mad with Hilda, George, Alessandro, and the whole gang. If they thought they could do this to me, a harmless, law-abiding citizen, they were crazy.

There was a telephone on the desk. I would call the police. Yes. Why not? I was innocent. I had nothing to fear.

I looked at Anstey's body lying there on the red carpet. Suddenly, calling the police didn't seem such a good idea, after all.

And then, just as I was thinking about the phone, it started to ring. It was a thin, horrible sound in that silent room. *Pin-n-n-n-ng . . . pin-n-n-n-ng . . .* I stood staring at it, stifling a painless impulse to flight.

The phone rang on. Slowly my hand went out. Then the nerve-racking thought came: "Maybe it's Alessandro to find out if I'm still here." Shouldn't I? . . . I picked up the receiver.

Of course, I didn't know how George talked. But most men, I figured, talked the same sort of way when they'd been awakened at four o'clock. I mumbled, "Ullo."

A woman's voice, one of the throaty, glamor variety which

comes sixteen to the dozen in show-business, said urgently, "George, this is Juliana. Is Hilda back yet?"

I thought of Hilda lying on the street corner huddled in the snow. Simply and truthfully I said, "No."

"George, I'm worried, are you?"

Once again, very truthfully, I said, "Yes."

"George, I'm calling about my pocketbook. I just realized I must have left it at your house this evening. A white one. I'm sure I left it in the bedroom when I fixed my hair. Be a darling and see if it's there."

I found myself staring straight at George's dead left foot. I flicked my eyes away. "Kay, Juliana. Hold on."

I hurried to the door of the inner room and turned on a wall switch. It was a bedroom, all right, with twin beds. On a repulsive mahogany bureau I saw a woman's white evening bag.

I was about to go back to the phone when I noticed, jubilantly, that there was an iron fire escape right outside the bedroom window. I'd never thought about a fire escape. Exit had been as elementary as all that!

I took up the receiver again. "Sure, Juliana; it's there."

"What a relief!" Juliana throbbed "George, will you be an angel and bring it around right away? The tickets are in it."

"Okay. I'll bring it around."

"Angel! And don't worry about

the money. You'll get it as soon as Hilda crashes through. I'll be seeing you, then."

"Sure. But hold on, Juliana. What's the address?"

"But, George, you *know* the address."

"Kind of sleepy. 'S gone out of my mind."

"Silly!" Juliana laughed exotically, gave a number on Park Avenue, and rang up.

I didn't know what I'd got myself into now. I didn't really care much. The discovery of the fire escape had given me a kind of devil-may-care assurance. I went into the bedroom and brought the pocketbook back to the desk. I opened it.

In a little pocket in the lining was a small envelope. Inside it were tickets. I took them out. Two train tickets with two accompanying drawing-room stubs. On the stubs I read: "Ski-Flyer, Franconia, N.H."

The Ski-Flyer! The wrong ski-train.

I remembered: "*You'll get the money when Hilda crashes through.*" I fingered the frankfurter in my pocket. Then I had been right. George and Hilda had been working for someone higher up. And that someone higher up was the glamorous, larynxed Juliana.

Just at that particular moment there was a distinct rap on the door. I looked at Anstey's body. I felt my pulses drumming wildly.

The rapping came again. Louder.

More authoritative. And a harsh, male voice said, "Open up in the name of the law."

The police! Feverishly I tugged out a handkerchief and wiped my fingerprints off the candlestick. But what good did that do? My fingerprints were on the desk, the telephone, the light switch, the ... And, adding the last excruciating touch, the hideous recollection came that last week, at Mrs. Ingoldsby's patriotic suggestion, I had submitted my fingerprints to the city in the mayor's Good Citizenship drive.

The rapping on the door was very insistent now. "Open up—or we'll bash the door in!"

How could I possibly explain my behavior to the police now? I couldn't. I grabbed up Juliana's pocketbook. My heart racing, I tiptoed to the bedroom, eased up the window, slipped out onto the platform of the fire escape, and lowered the window cautiously behind me.

I reached ground level. I was in a kind of yard at the back of the apartment house. It was surrounded on three sides by a high, distinctly unscalable wall. I ran through the snow to the wall parallel to the house. There must be a door.

There was. But it was clamped shut by a large padlock.

I turned back to the house itself. I had no choice. There were steps going down to a wooden door, presumably leading to a cellar. I groped my way down them to the

door. It wasn't locked. I pushed it open and stole inside, into cavernous darkness.

I lit a match, and its feeble flame revealed a regular cellar. I could see a furnace. The air was pungent with coal-gas fumes. My only hope was that the cellar stretched all the way under the house and had an exit onto 69th Street. It was hardly the ideal route, because it would bring me smack out under the nose of the police car. But that was a risk which had to be run.

Lighting match after match, I crept on. At last I made out a door ahead. Above it was a square skylight, which meant I was below street level. That was something.

I went to the door. My hand hit a padlock like the one on the yard door, then, an exquisite relief, my fingers felt a key. I unlocked the padlock. Shakily I opened the door inward. Snow scattered in and with it the pale light from the street.

I slipped out. I was in a little areaway. Iron railings above marked the street. There was a flight of stone steps leading up.

Vaguely I had expected sound, excitement. Didn't that always happen when the police arrived? But there was no sound.

Gingerly I started up the snowy steps. Six steps up I stopped, because my eyes were then at street level. It was a rather crazy sensation having my eyes on the sidewalk. A cat's view of New York.

I looked for the police car,

parked outside 135A. It was on the other side of the street about fifty feet away. And I recognized it as definitely as I could ever recognize any car. It wasn't a police car. It was the gray, low-slung car.

I stood there halfway up the steps, feeling a cold chill which was half fear, half fury. Then I heard muffled footsteps echoing on the sidewalk, and I ducked down into the areaway, pressing myself against the wall in the shadow.

The person who was walking toward 135A was coming fast. The footsteps grew nearer and nearer. From where I stood in the shadow I would be able to get a good view without being seen myself. In a few seconds the pedestrian came into my sphere of vision. I saw him in a queer, low-angle way. But that was all I needed. It wasn't difficult to recognize my buddy, Alessandro.

He hurried past me, almost at a run, and swerved up the front steps of 135A. I heard the door open and close softly behind him. It was obvious what had happened upstairs now. Alessandro must have telephoned an account of his exploits to the two unknown men of the gray sedan and they had returned to finish off his half-hearted job. Alessandro, presumably, had the only keys and he had been late for the party. So they had pretended to be the police, in the hope of tricking me into letting them in.

When they found me gone they would come down right away.

I didn't have to wait long. Scarcely five minutes after Alessandro's hurried entrance into 135A, I heard indeterminate sounds, sounds that became footsteps, the opening of a door, and then low voices.

I couldn't see the men. They were standing inside the dark outer hallway of the house, almost immediately above my head. But I heard Alessandro's voice, blustering, self-vindicating: "You didn't tell me anything about this guy, Steve. You just say over the phone to get Anstey. Then this guy comes in, acts phony, and so I sock him. Then, after Anstey got back and I fixed him, this guy's still there out cold on the floor. I figure maybe you'd want to give him a once-over, so I lock him in. And I stick the candlestick in his hand, so if the cops get there first they'd figure he slugged Anstey."

"Even though he was lying unconscious on the floor and locked into the apartment from the outside! Very brilliant, Alessandro." This second voice, presumably 'Steve's', was soft, with a queer lilt to it which wasn't exactly American and yet not exactly foreign, either. "And you saved him for me by leaving him there with a perfectly good fire escape. In the immortal words of Hilda Purvis: *Nuts to you, Alessandro.*"

That was the flossiest speech I'd ever heard from a crook. But, even so, that soft voice did something to the back of my neck. It was as ruth-

less and velvet-gloved an affair as I'd hope to run up against, on stage or off.

"So you let him get away. The man who was with Hilda tonight on Madison Avenue, the man who's almost certainly the one they sold us out to, the only person who could wreck our whole plan. We don't even know his name."

"Ain't got his name?" Alessandro's snort was outraged. "What you think I am? Of course I frisked him for a gat. And I found a card. It's got his name on. Peter Duluth. And a couple addresses where he lives."

"Peter Duluth, eh? I believe there's a theatrical producer of that name. I wonder—Show me the card, Alessandro."

I felt as if I'd swallowed a cupful of cold oatmeal.

"Yes," said Steve's voice. "So that's the man. Maybe you have redeemed yourself a little, Alessandro."

A third voice spoke for the first time; it was young and anxious: "Listen, Steve. We better get out of here. For all you know, this Duluth guy called the police."

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, Dickie, Mr. Duluth will steer as clear of the police as we do. He'll be playing a lone hand now. Well, we know his address. There should be plenty of time to make his acquaintance before eight-thirty tonight."

8:30. That was the time the Ski-Monarch left Grand Central.



Plenty of time to make his acquaintance. Those words, so assured, so silky smooth so unnerving, rang in my ears as feet shuffled down the snowy steps above me.

Then Steve's voice said, "Wait," and the man in the middle stooped down to tie his shoelace. I couldn't see his face because his hat was pulled down. But, as his right hand stretched out of his sleeve over the shoe, the light from the cigarette in his mouth lit up the skin above his wrist. And, distinctly, I saw there a blue, thin scar, shaped like a half-moon.

It was all over in a second. Steve stood up again and they moved on. But, just as they had almost passed out of sight, he reached across Alessandro and flicked the cigarette stub into the basement.

It dropped almost at my feet. And it seemed to me that suddenly there was a faint, sweet smell in the cold February air. I picked up the stub. I sniffed it. Yes, there was a definite perfume. I shifted from the shadows to the middle of the areaway, where dim light struck down from the street light. The cigarette had a gold tip and, written in small gold letters across the white paper, was the word: *Fortuna*.

The voce, that scar, that brand of cigarettes. At least I had something to recognize Steve by, when we met again.

I heard the gray car start in the street above me. For a minute or so after the sound of it had faded into the distant noises of pre-dawn New York, I stayed there in the areaway. I faced my predicament squarely for the first time. There was no longer anything gay or debonair about it.

My fingerprints in the murder-apartment—thanks to Mrs. Ingoldsby and the mayor—were bound to involve me hopelessly with the police. Alessandro's sinister, soft-spoken boss not only knew my name, he assumed that I was the person who had bribed Anstey into double-crossing him, the person who was out to frustrate his mysterious expedition on the Ski-Monarch. For that, if for nothing else, he would certainly stop at nothing to send me after George and Hilda.

I felt frightened and strangely self-assured at the same time. I weighed my assets. Juliana, ob-

viously, was the foremost. Juliana, with the glamour voice and the two tickets for the wrong ski-train; Juliana, who was sitting at home in Park Avenue waiting for her bag, waiting for Hilda to "crash through."

Over the phone I had promised to take her pocketbook back to her. I hadn't really meant it then. But things were very different now. Everything seemed to point my next move distinctly toward Juliana.

III

JULIANA'S PARK AVENUE apartment house managed to exude class even at that hour of the morning. Although there was nothing I could do about my swollen nose. I made the rest of myself as respectable as possible and pushed through glass doors into a fancy, lighted vestibule.

A bored night porter and an even more bored redhead behind the switchboard stared at me. It was only then that the uncomfortable realization came that I didn't know whom to ask for. Juliana. Just plain Juliana. There seemed only one thing to do.

I became suddenly drunk. I reeled to the desk. I fixed the redhead with what was probably a genuinely bleary eye and muttered thickly, "Mis-sh Juliana . . .," then a series of completely indistinguishable syllables which, I hoped, would cover any name from Levy to Buttersthaite.

Rather to my surprise it worked like a charm. The redhead stared gloomily and said, "Whooshllizayz-calling?"

"George Anstey."

That had been risky, but the girl showed no skepticism.

She said down a mouthpiece, "Mr. Anstey here." And then, "Okay." She glared at the porter over my shoulder. "Take him up to 12, Humbolt."

Humbolt did.

"Second door to the right," he said, and slammed the elevator gates behind me.

I was in a very vogueish hallway with frameless mirrors and mole-gray rugs. I might have felt apprehensive of danger. But I didn't. I counted doors. Second to the right. I reached it. There was a stylish card inserted in the door.

I leaned forward to read it, but, before I could do so, the door was opened inward and a girl trailing clouds of exotic negligee swirled out.

"George, you're an ange—" she began, and then stopped dead, staring at me.

I was staring at her, too. It was a most awkward moment for both of us. I stammered, "Julie."

And she stammered, "Peter."

And I was thinking, Juliana Guilder. Of course. Why in heaven's name hadn't I recognized that voice over the phone? That all goes to show how passion dies.

Four years ago Juliana Guilder,

The Dutch Tulip, Broadway's most publicized glamour actress, had been, voice and all, the most torrid thing in my life. Three years ago she had been the most glacial thing in my life. One year ago, when I met Iris, Juliana had become something infinitely embarrassing and to be avoided, who found me equally embarrassing and to be avoided.

Juliana was the one person in New York I liked the idea of seeing least. Now—here she was.

After the first second of shock Julie gathered her face together, and it was one of the most sensational faces ever to have immigrated from Amsterdam, Holland. "Peter, so you've come to see me. How charming! But I was expecting someone quite . . ." Then her eyes, behind their lustrous lashes, fell on her pocketbook under my arm. That stopped that. She looked blank and then almost crafty, and said, "Come in, Peter."

She took my hand and drew me into the apartment, shutting the door behind us. She led the way, using her body for all it was worth. And it was worth a lot. It was the chic apartment to end all chic apartments. Plate glass, pastels, and Picassos. Far more expensively chic, I reflected cynically, than even Juliana could swing without assistance.

She lounged onto a couch and patted the cushion next to her. In the old days that would have excited me. Even at five o'clock in the

morning. Now I was far more interested in something I saw in the corner.

Two pairs of skis, neatly bound together with their accompanying ski poles. And, under them, the very latest thing in Norwegian leather rucksacks.

Two lots of skis. Two tickets for the Ski-Flyer. Juliana. And who else?

Abandoning the almost automatic seduction act, Juliana said rather shrilly, "George Anstey was going to bring my bag back. At the desk you said you were George Anstey."

I had to walk very warily. Juliana was nobody's fool. I took the handbag from under my arm and handed it to her.

I said, "I happened to be around at George's and he asked me to bring it for you. I gave his name downstairs. Less complicated."

She stared at me doubtfully. "Did he send a message?"

"Just to make sure about the money when Hilda crashes through."

She blurted, "And has Hilda crashed through?"

I put my hand in my overcoat pocket and touched the frankfurter which, on account of that scrap of paper inside it, had cost Hilda her life.

"Sure," I said. "Hilda crashed through."

Juliana's eyes flashed. "Then tell me. What did—?" She broke off,

as if she realized she'd made a mistake. "But you're not working with George and Hilda. You can't be. And when I called I woke him up. He'd been asleep—alone."

"Sure. I just happened to drop in later, after you'd called."

She was really suspicious now. "I don't believe you. This is a trap. Why did you go to see George?"

I tried shifting my ground. "Oh, I'd just been out with the boys."

"The boys?"

That seemed the moment for the crusher. "Yes," I said. "The boys. Alessandro and Steve and—"

"Steve!" The complexion which had put Holland in soap ads from coast to coast turned faintly green. "Stephen Dorn," she whispered. "You were with Stephen Dorn?"

It had worked. I knew my antagonist's full name now: Stephen Dorn. A big step in the right direction.

"Yes," I said. "Alessandro, Stephen Dorn, and"—remembering the name Steve had used for the third man—"Dickie."

She did stand up then. For a moment I thought she was going to faint. She came to me, all chiffon and Chanel. She gripped my arm. "Stephen Dorn sent you here!" she babbled. "He knows about us. He's found out that George and Hilda double-crossed him for us, that we're after him. This is his way of showing he knows—sending you here. This is—"

If she went on that way much

longer, she'd collapse. I saw I was defeating my own ends by getting her that scared. So I shifted tactics again to try to quiet her.

"Stephen Dorn didn't send me here," I said. "He doesn't know there's a tie-up between you and George Anstey." All of which was true. "And I never said I was working with Dorn, either. I'm not."

That worked like a miracle.

"Then who—?" she began.

At that particular moment I heard the front door open and close. Juliana broke away from me and swirled around to face the hallway. I turned, ill-prepared for almost anything.

And then a man came in. A dark, smooth, expensive, middle-aged man with a little mustache and a thousand-dollar mink-lined overcoat. I recognized him—just the way everyone on Broadway would have recognized him. Derek Huysmans, the fabulously rich New York-Amsterdam diamond magnate who was the most sought-after play backer in show-business, the star angel of every producer's prayers.

So this, I reflected, was where the extra rental came from. This, too, was probably the other half of Julie's "us," her companion-to-be on the Ski-Flyer.

I left the social amenities to Juliana. She didn't do a very good job with them. With a kind of wild politeness she said, "Derek, this is Peter Duluth, the producer."

Derek Huysmans stared at me, or rather through me. He didn't seem surprised or jealous to find me there at five o'clock in the morning. He didn't even seem interested.

Juliana stopped trying to be poised. Distractedly she poured out to him every word I'd said. He was interested then. He swung round to me, very intent and poker-faced.

"You've just come back from Anstey's, Mr. Duluth. Then you can possibly confirm something I've just heard over the radio. I've just heard that Hilda Purvis and George Anstey have been murdered. Hilda was shot on a street corner. Anstey was killed in his apartment about three o'clock tonight."

That wasn't one of my best moments.

"Murdered!" echoed Juliana. "So—so Stephen Dorn found out. He got them." Slowly, very slowly, she turned to me. She stared at me as if I were something horrible and unclean. "You! When I called, George was dead. That voice on the phone, it was—you!"

They were both staring at me. I saw the ivory telephone on a glass table. I thought of the police. I felt sweat trickling down inside my undershirt.

Slowly, because it seemed the only possible thing to do, I started backing toward the door. My hand was still in my overcoat pocket. My fingers closed around Hilda's frankfurter and I pushed it forward, trying to make them think it was a gun.

Probably it was a very feeble pretense. I didn't know. I wasn't used to scenes like that. I hadn't the gangster technique.

As I backed to the door, neither of them tried to stop me. That gave me courage. Helped me to think, too. I said, "Before you call the police, Juliana, you might remember that you were at Anstey's tonight yourself. It might be very—"

"No one's going to call the police, Mr. Duluth." Huysmans was still watching me. Very calmly he moved to a desk, opened a drawer, and brought out a revolver. "And, since I rather doubt whether that is a gun in your pocket, perhaps you'd sit down and we can have a little talk."

I sat down, and he came closer, Juliana hovering at his side. "You told Juliana that you weren't one of Dorn's associates. Is that true?"

"Absolutely true." If I'd pretended to be tied up with Dorn, I was pretty sure Huysmans would have killed me then, neatly, and rung for a Japanese butler to remove the corpse. I added, with strict candor:

"I'm just in this thing on my own."

"In that case I'd advise you very strongly to get out of it while you're still alive."

That wasn't designed to make me feel any better. "I can't get out of it—not until I've found out a few things. Why you and Juliana are going on the Ski-Flyer tomorrow, for example."

Huysmans's eyes flickered. Juliana said sharply, "He doesn't know anything, Derek. He just saw the tickets in my bag. It's a bluff."

"Is it also a bluff if I tell you that you're wasting your time going on the Ski-Flyer?" I asked.

That got them both. Huysmans stiffened. Juliana grabbed at his arm. "He talked about Hilda crashing through. Maybe he does know."

Huysmans put the gun back in his pocket. He was very sure of himself. "I was planning to pay Anstey and Hilda Purvis a certain sum of money for certain information. If you have that information, Mr. Duluth, I am willing to pay you what I would have paid them."

"I'm not interested in money,"



I said, "I'm—Hell! I just want to know what it's all about."

Huysmans's face was as wooden as ever. He took the gun out of his pocket again. "Haven't you rather failed to grasp the situation, Mr. Duluth? I have a gun. You have certain information. Perhaps you would be good enough to give it to me."

Being killed by Huysmans would feel much the same as being killed by Dorn. I didn't give much of a darn, anyway. Why shouldn't he have his information? My hand went into my pocket.

Suddenly it all seemed funny, deliriously, insanely funny. I took the frankfurter out of my pocket and handed it to him.

He snatched it eagerly, stripped off the wrapping, twisted it around, and pulled the little scrap of paper out of the slit in the skin. Juliana ran to his side, trailing chiffon, staring over his shoulder.

Slowly they both looked up. There was an expression of triumph on their faces, real, honest-to-goodness triumph.

Huysmans went back to the desk, took out a checkbook, and scribbled. He came to me. "However you came by this information, Mr. Duluth, you deserve to be paid for it. And just one word of advice: Let this be the end of your interest in the affair. It will be considerably safer for you."

He pressed a check into my hand. I took it. I don't really know

why. Largely, I suppose, because when people press checks into your hand you just naturally don't let go. I looked down at it. I felt a little dizzy. It was made out to me. And it was for \$10,000.

As I moved dazedly to the door, Huysmans was still holding the frankfurter caressingly, as if it were a pearl of great price. Which, of course, it was. Probably the first \$10,000 hot dog in the history of meat packing.

IV

IT WAS STILL snowing when I left the apartment house. It was still dark, too. February nights seem to go on indefinitely. The check in my pocket still had me slightly giddy.

I knew a bit more of the picture now. Stephen Dorn was working some big deal, something concerned with skiing. It had been fixed for the Ski-Flyer and New Hampshire, and then switched to the Ski-Monarch and Greenfield, Vermont. Greenfield was near the Canadian border. Was that it? Smuggling, perhaps? Something big, anyway; something big enough for Huysmans to have paid \$10,000 for a hot-dogful of information about it.

I knew all that. Yes. But it didn't help me. I was still a fugitive from the police, from Dorn—from half of New York.

I scanned Park Avenue uneasily. There was no sign of the gray, low-

slung car. But there was a taxi. I got it and gave my home address. The prospect of Iris was something very specially nice. Iris was so beautiful, so intelligent, so sane. Things would seem less unspeakable when I saw her.

We had almost reached the street I lived on when I came to my senses with a bang. Stephen Dorn had my address. For all I knew, the gray car was already waiting there outside the front door.

I leaned forward shakily. I said to the driver, "Not the front door. Don't go down the front street. There's a service entrance at the back." I gave directions.

It went through without a hitch. There was nothing sinister about the service entrance, only a sleepy night watchman who took me up to my floor in the service elevator. I went to my own door. My heart started fluttering. It always does at the thought of seeing Iris. I took out my key. I let myself in.

The lights were on in the living-room. The heavy drapes were pulled. Iris was lying on the sofa in pajamas, her black hair rumpled over a cushion. You ought to see Iris asleep. It's one of the best things the human race has thought up—so serene, so beautiful, and yet so sensible, too.

She woke before I reached her. She got up, throwing back her hair and looking very unyielding.

"Home is the scalp-hunter," she said nastily.

I went to her and took her in my arms and kissed her. "Iris!" Her hair smells so subtle. And the feel of her in your arms! Everything was so very all right again.

But I was still on the job. I went away from her. I turned out the light. I moved to the curtained window and pulled back the edge of the heavy drape. I had a direct view of the street below. I could see anything that was there to the end of the block.

I saw dark houses; I saw snowy, empty sidewalks; I saw the snow swirling down. And — I couldn't bear it. I just couldn't bear it—I saw, easing up to park at the curb on the other side of the street, a gray, low-slung car.

I let the curtain drop. I turned back to Iris. I said, "I shouldn't have come back. They're here. I shouldn't have come back. Now there'll be danger for you, too."

"What danger?"

"Just danger. Straight, simple danger. Darling, I've seen two murders tonight. I've been shot at. I've been locked up with a corpse. I've been given a check for ten thousand dollars. I've been chased by crooks in a car. They've just caught up with me again. They're outside."

I took her arms, just because I had to have some kind of contact with her. I told her everything from the very beginning.

She wasn't believing me. Gradually I came to realize that. She just thought I was drunk.

"But it's true, darling. I can show you the check. And—look. Go to the window. Be careful, but look out. You'll see the car."

That was when the phone rang. I looked at Iris. She looked at me. I started for the phone; then, like lightening, she pushed ahead of me and took it. Her voice was perfect, the voice of the bewildered, injured wife.

"No, Mr. Duluth isn't here," she said. "Yes. He called about twenty minutes ago from the Pennsylvania Station. He said he was leaving for Washington right away. . . . It's all very sudden. I knew nothing about it. He didn't even come home and pack. Urgent business, he said. And he wouldn't be back for several days. . . . What? . . . Yes. He said I could get in touch with him at the Sherry-Carlton. I'm sure you'll reach him there."

Iris put down the receiver. We looked at each other. Very quietly she said, "Okay, Peter. You win."

"The voice?"

"The most loathsome voice I ever heard—soft, cultured."

"Stephen Dorn."

"He said he was an actor who had an appointment with you in the morning. He apologized for calling at this hour, some reason he gave. It was perfectly plausible." Her voice had a funny little quiver in it.

"Thank heaven, you were back in time to warn me," she went on. "If he'd called five minutes earlier

I wouldn't have suspected a thing. I'd have told him I was expecting you any moment."

She came to me then, slipping her hand in mine. "Peter, was I convincing? I wanted to fool him into thinking you'd got scared and cleared out. Do you think he believed me? Do you think he'll go away?"

"If they do, darling, you probably saved my life—for the time being, at least."

We went to the window and pulled back the drape just enough to see the gray car move swiftly away.

"We can turn the light on now." Iris's voice was cold, almost prim. She went from me and turned on a reading lamp. "Come sit on the couch."

I did.

"Now tell it to me all over again."

When it was all over, she said, "Peter, at the beginning when the girl was shot, why didn't you wait there and tell the police everything when they came?"

I felt guilty. "I—I thought of the scandal. You know how Mrs. Ingoldsby —"

"There needn't have been any scandal if you told the truth then. You must have known that."

I felt even guiltier. "Well, darling, you see I was kind of muddled. I'd been drinking and —"

"That's more like it." She sat there looking utterly beautiful and

as cool now as the Lincoln Tunnel. "Since you registered only last week in the Good Citizenship Drive, your fingerprints probably aren't filed in Washington yet. But they will be soon, and then the police will trace you."

"Exactly."

"And what are you going to tell them? How are you going to explain all the crazy things you've done?"

"I don't see how I can."

"Neither do I. Even if you wriggle out of a murder charge, you'll still be an accessory after the fact."

I thought of that, gloomily.

Suddenly, accusingly, Iris added, "You never told me you knew Juliana Guilder before we were married."

I faltered under that unexpected flank attack. I stammered, "Didn't I? I guess I didn't think it would interest you."

"It was just a brief and beautiful friendship, I suppose. Quiet evenings together nodding over your needlepoint." She lapsed into momentary silence.

When she spoke again her pique had given away to concern. "If Dorn believed me, he'll send someone to Washington after you. He'll surely send Alessandro, since he's the one who knows what you look like. That means the other two—Dorn and Dickie—won't have any way of recognizing you."

I said, with a certain sour dignity, "You forget that I'm a promi-

nent man of the theatre. My picture appears regularly in the newspapers."

"Publicity pictures!" said Iris. "Pooh!"

She was becoming excited. She ran to a desk and came back with a big portfolio, untying ribbons.

"I've kept them all. Look!" She strewed glossy portraits all over me, pointing derisively. "Look! Man of distinction shots, all of them touched up in a supposedly flattering way. Who'd recognize you from photographs like this?"

I bridled. I'd always thought those pictures were pretty good likenesses.

She came to me, throwing back her dark hair, sitting on the publicity photographs, taking my hands. "You'd better get some sleep, darling, because we're going on the Ski-Monarch tonight."

I stared at her.

"It's perfect skiing weather, and I've been dying for weeks to try Hurricane Trail again. Next week we'll be in production, and there won't be another chance this year."

"But, Iris—"

"Don't you see how it's the only way?" She turned to me almost fiercely. "It's all coming to a head in Greenfield, isn't it? You're doomed if you just sit around here waiting for the police or Stephen Dorn to catch up with you. But if we go up there, find out what the fantastic thing is all about, and somehow get evidence, then we can

go to the police with the whole story. They'll have to believe us then. And it'll only be then, when this Stephen Dorn and his friends are arrested, that there'll be any kind of safety for you."

That made crazy Iris sort of sense.

"But Juiliana and Huysmans will be on the train, too," I protested.

A contemptuous gesture swept them away. "They're as scared of Dorn as we are. We can keep an eye on them and, with any luck, they'll give us a lead."

That made crazy Iris sort of sense, too.

"All right," I said bleakly. "I guess I've dug my grave, and I'll lie in it. But I'm not going to let you fool around with my Mata Hari act."

"Nonsense." Iris's eyes were gleaming. "Wild horses wouldn't keep me away." She paused. "On second thoughts, we'd better not travel together. Juliana doesn't know me, and I don't want her or anyone else to tab me as your wife. I can be much more use if I'm just a girl on her own."

Iris's smile was rather unfriendly. "Maybe I'll find a masculine Juliana. Maybe I'll be picked up by a lovely ski-instructor with muscles."

Iris looked dreamy. A pause, and then, "One thing more, Peter."

"What, darling?"

"The check, darling. Hand it over."

I gave it to her. Firmly, severely,

she tore it into little pieces. "No hot dog," she said, "is worth ten thousand bucks. We Duluths don't go in for that kind of easy money."

And that was that.

My nose was painful, but Iris refused to do anything about it. She had the idea the swelling would make it harder for anyone to recognize me. At her insistence, I went sullenly to bed. Against all reason, I slept.

The next morning Iris came in, very gay, in an oyster-white negligee. She was carrying a cup of coffee.

"So you're awake," she said.

She sat down on the bed. She looked superb but executive. I pushed myself up and kissed her.

"Everything's arranged." She was taking it all as lightly as if it were a taffy-pull. "I've waxed the skis. And I've got the sleeper tickets. Yours is in your wallet. You're in R. Eighteen. I'm in S. Thirty-seven. I've decided that your name's Martin Jones. Mine's Cynthia Rowley." She looked romantic. "Isn't that a beautiful name, Peter?"

"A name to launch a thousand ski-instructors. Go on."

"The police haven't arrived. And there's been no sign of the gray car. But I'm taking no chances. I'll leave by taxi from the front. You'll wait ten minutes, and then leave in a taxi from the service entrance."

Suddenly I was hating it.

"On the Ski-Monarch we'll have absolutely nothing to do with each

other. And it's your job to identify Stephen Dorn and Dickie without their recognizing you."

"Pick them out of two hundred and fifty unknown skiers?"

"Yes. And when we get to the Mountain Inn we watch—and foil."

"What could be simpler?" I groaned.

She got up and went out of the room. She came back with something small and black and gleaming. She held it out to me. "I got this for you."

"A revolver!"

"Well, it's only a prop revolver. I got it from Eddie at the Vandolan Theater. But it's the best I could do."

I took it. "Chasing unknown murderers with a toy revolver! Iris, we can't do it. It's too whimsical."

Iris looked very severe. "You'd rather be whimsical, wouldn't you—than dead?"

V

MY TAXI TOOK me through the snowy streets and dumped me at Grand Central Station. Iris had left the apartment ten minutes before me. Everything had run according to schedule. Having slept through the daylight hours, I lost all sense of everything except darkness. This still seemed the same interminable night which had begun with Hilda Purvis sprawling dead in the snow. And my reaction to it was much the same.



But there's something exhilarating about the feel of skis on your shoulder. Something indestructibly un sinister about a modern railroad station. Brushing redcaps aside, I started down the ramp into the vast, animated arena. I wasn't Peter Duluth any more, I told myself. I was—whoosit?—Martin Jones, an enthusiastic, solitary skier bound for Vermont with his head full of stem-Christies and Telemarks.

I thought of Juliana and Huysmans. Would they be on the train yet? But even that couldn't change my holiday mood. I knew none of these healthy, ruddy-cheeked peo-

ple. And surely none of them knew me. Surely it wasn't possible that hidden in all these innocent good spirits there lurked the unpleasant shadow of Stephen Dorn.

The Ski-Monarch, long, low, and green stretched along the platform. With its lighted windows and grinning porters calling their Pullman numbers, it too, seemed to have a sportive, vacation air.

And then, suddenly, as I moved along in the crowd, I saw Iris. It was amazing how she stood out. Her tricky ski costume was as exotic as they come, and yet, in spite of the glamor, there was an undefinable air of assurance. Anyone looking at her could have told that she was a champion skier. Which she was.

My first reaction was one of husbandly pride. My second — which should have been my first—was a quick stab of apprehension. Somehow, it was only then, when we were actually about to board the train, that I realized just how wantonly I was letting her plunge into danger.

I had an absurd desire to catch up with her and force her to go back to the apartment out of harm's way. Then both my pride and my anxiety suffered a setback. Because she was not alone.

She was walking with a man. I saw his profile as he turned to look at her. He was very big, very blond, very handsome. A Scandinavian of some sort. He was carrying Iris's skis as well as his own, slung over his shoulder above his rucksack.

I felt a kind of fury and a kind of jealousy and a kind of hurt. After all, I'd been married to her only six months. Then, slowly, there was a grudging admiration, too. A "ski-instructor" before she had even boarded the train! My wife certainly was a fast worker.

Sulking, I stumped on up the platform to R. 18.

The berths hadn't been made down yet and the car was as festive as a fraternity common room. Strangers were already treating strangers like lifelong friends, tied together by the common bond of snow and slalom.

Four college boys, exuberantly sharing a pint of rye, were giving a lusty performance of *The Last Roundup*; three show girls, who had obviously never seen a ski slope, were trying to make three young men think Sun Valley was their Home from Home; two lean-faced men and a woman with strong hands and a Helen Hokinson figure were determinedly arguing the merits of various waxes on fast snow.

I dumped my skis with the pile of others in the little compartment just inside the entrance and weaved through the passengers to my seat. I sat down, and simultaneously was hit in the ear by an elbow. I looked up, to see a young man with tousled brown hair, intelligent eyes, and a slight boy's body. He was smiling apologetically.

"Sorry," he said in a refreshingly un-Stephen-Dorn Middle West ac-

cent. "I've always had the most uncontrollable elbows."

He fixed his things, sat down opposite me, and pulled out a book from his ski jacket pocket. I saw the title. It was *What Maisie Knew*, by Henry James.

Suddenly I felt a queer kind of panic. So little to go on. A perfumed cigarette—and one didn't smoke in sleepers. A half-moon-shaped scar above the right wrist—and all wrists were hidden under the buttoned sleeves of ski jackets. And a voice.

That was all. A voice. One voice out of two hundred and fifty skiers.

Outside someone was shouting. A whistle blew. The car, with its enthusiastic, chattering passengers, seemed suddenly unreal, ominous. What if I grabbed Iris and got off now?

There was a groaning lurch. A forward jerk. And, outside the window, the platform started slipping slowly backward. The Ski-Monarch was under way.

I sat there, having absolutely no sort of plan. The Hokinson woman, still talking with a passionate knowledge of skiing which her figure belied, had produced a bag and was knitting like mad. Her voice trailed across to me:

"It's all right on the Hurricane Trail, but it would be crazy to try it on the Ramp. The terrain—"

The Ramp! It came to me then, a half-buried recollection released by that chance remark. In the franker note Hilda had written:

Transfer 10 A. M. *northern foot of Ramp*. Until then that had meant nothing to me. A bus transfer? A station ramp?

But now it meant everything. The Hurricane Trail wound precipitously down a mountain called Laurel Mountain. But right up against it, virtually on the Canadian border, was another mountain, a bare, sheer, ugly mountain which, by its queer contour, managed to dominate the whole countryside. I remembered that mountain well. But until then I had entirely forgotten its name.

The Ramp—of course.

So that was to be the crucial spot. 10 A. M. Tomorrow morning? Tomorrow morning, at the northern foot of that ominous mountain, Stephen Dorn was going to make a transfer. A transfer! Surely my original hunch had been right. Some sort of smuggling across the border. But smuggling of what? I thought of Huysmans, one of New York's biggest diamond magnates.

Diamonds—of course!

Across the aisle the young man with the tousled hair slammed his Henry James shut, grinned at me, and said, "Maisie always works like a charm. Two pages of what she knew and I need a drink."

He got up and strolled down the aisle toward the rear of the train, presumably in search of the bar car. I sat on alone, feeling a mounting excitement. Locate Dorn and Dickie, watch them like a hawk,

and then, tomorrow morning at ten o'clock . . .

I needed a drink. Then I would be all set for action.

I moved unsteadily down the aisle onto the rocking platform, where the cold air came up and where the train became suddenly a rushing, clattering missile, roaring northward through the snow, instead of a bright, static coach.

Finally I reached a compartment for the really swanky skiers. I squeezed down the narrow, deserted corridor, the train jolting me against the closed compartment doors.

I had almost come to the end of it when I heard the door from the next car opening. From where I was I couldn't see around the corner to who was coming in. But I heard a husky, agitated woman's voice, saying, "I told you we shouldn't go to the bar."

I may not have recognized that voice the night before, when I answered Anstey's telephone. But now it was indelibly stamped on my memory.

Juliana!

I was right opposite the washroom. I ducked through the green curtain into the little empty room. I heard footsteps in the corridor coming closer and closer.

Then Huysman's voice, soft, unemotional: "Why worry? He doesn't know anything about us."

And then Juliana, urgently: "I know. But just seeing him there in the bar scares me."

The voices faded with the footsteps.

Just seeing him there in the bar! I felt a tingling of excitement. I started to push back the curtain and move out of the washroom. But I didn't. My hand dropped to my side.

I stood quite still, the hairs at the back of my neck stirring. I hadn't noticed it before. I guess I had been entirely absorbed with Juliana and Huysmans. But now it trailed through the stale air toward me—a sweet, sickly perfume, a perfume which brought back with horrible vividness the small hours of the morning, the snowy basement of 135A East 69th Street—fear, and that soft cultured, loathsome voice.

I turned. I stared at the row of washbasins, the bare leather couch, the ash tray. Sending a small, blue spiral of smoke up into the air, was a cigarette butt. I went to it. I picked it up, the perfume invading my nostrils. I read the small, gold letters around its base: *Fortuna*.

Just seeing him there in the bar scares me. A Fortuna cigarette but—This was too easy. Stephen Dorn had just been here in the washroom. Stephen Dorn had just gone to the bar.

I hurried out onto the platform leading to the next car. I looked through the plate-glass window into the car beyond. It was the bar car itself, the last car on the train.

This was certainly too easy! Out of the two hundred and fifty-odd skiers on the Ski-Monarch, a wild

coincidence had narrowed Stephen Dorn down to one of the handful beyond me there in the bar.

I saw my friend with the tousled hair and the Henry James standing at the bar. He saw me and waved. I saw another single man at the bar. A dark latin-type young man who, for one unpleasant moment, I thought was Alessandro. He wasn't.

I saw an indeterminate youth with pale eyes and a red-haired girl sipping what looked like Cuba Libres at one of the tables. And then, with a violent jolt, I saw Iris and her Scandinavian.

They were sitting at the center table of the car. The Scandinavian had his broad back to me. But I could see Iris's face. She saw me, too. But she paid me no attention. She was leaning over a liqueur brandy, gazing into the Scandinavian's eyes as if they were deep, unmined fiords.

Cynthia Rowley, indeed!

And then, while my indignation was simmering, I saw the only other occupants of the bar. They, too, were sitting at a table together. They were both drinking highballs. They were both youngish men.

One with very large, dark eyes, too much dark hair, and the sleeves of his ski jacket buttoned tightly around his wrists. The other, pink and boyish and frank-eyed with the sort of calculated unsophistication of someone who has learned that being pink and boyish and frank-eyed pays dividends.



Because I couldn't just stand there, I joined my Henry James friend at the bar. He put his book down and said, "Maisie's done it again. Two more pages and I'm set for another drink. What'll you have?"

"Scotch and soda," I said.

I glanced at the young man beyond us at the bar. He seemed bored and rather miserable and completely indifferent.

The drinks came. The young man with the tousled hair went on talking amiably, but I wasn't really paying attention. I was thinking: Eight people in the car. Six men—Henry James, the Italian, the man with the redhead, Iris's Scandinavian and the two ornate young men in the corner.

Six men—one of them Stephen Dorn.

It was a queer, creepy sensation, knowing he was there in that little group—the man who had tried to kill me, the man who would try even

more vigorously to kill me if he knew that I, the man with the curious nose and the Scotch and soda, was Peter Duluth.

How to narrow him down without arousing suspicion? That was the problem. I was working on it when, suddenly, disastrously, I heard a female voice behind me, caroling, ecstatic: "Is it? Can it be? Yes, yes it is. Peter, *darling!*"

The bar seemed to sway around me. I didn't dare turn around.

"Peter, but how *divine!*"

There was one awful moment of suspense. Then I felt a hand clutch my sleeve. I turned, staring dizzily at a spectacular blonde. There was another blonde with her. They were both dazzling me with smiles.

I felt something sink through me like a plummet. Why did I have to be a Broadway producer and know every bit actress in town? Particularly actresses who had worked with me like this—what was her name?—Amanda Bell.

Amanda Bell was pulling the other blonde forward. Escape was utterly impossible. "Peter, this is Gloria West. Gloria, this is Peter Duluth." The name seemed to boom around the bar like an explosion. "*The Peter Duluth, you know. Really the most divinely handsome important man on Broadway.*"

Her laughter tinkled. She went on; "Do you know, Peter, for a moment I didn't recognize you? It's your nose. What have you done to

your nose? Really, it's rather divine."

That "Peter Duluth" still seemed to roar around the car. I was acutely conscious of the fact that everyone was staring at us; the two young men glancing up under their lashes; the redhead and her boyfriend frankly curious; Iris's Scandinavian turning his head to give me a long, curious look. Even the Italian shifted out of his lethargy and stared.

Only Iris remained studiously uninterested. And, as the ground crumbled under my feet, that was one slight straw to cling to. Amanda Bell hadn't known me since my marriage. At least, she wouldn't recognize Iris.

"Peter, darling, this is too heavenly. Tell me all about yourself. Are you producing this season?"

I just couldn't cope with them. I could only think how devastatingly the tables had been turned, how somewhere around me in the car Stephen Dorn was watching me; Stephen Dorn, whom I had narrowed down to one of six men and who had now very definitely narrowed me down to one man.

From now on the dice were loaded against me. From now on I would be living, breathing, and sleeping—danger.

Mumbling something incoherent, I walked out on Amanda and Gloria. I left them flat. I hurried out of the bar car. And I didn't look at anyone as I went. Not even at 'Cynthia Rowley.'

When I got back, shakily, to my sleeper, the gaiety was over. Skiers keep early hours. Almost all the berths had been made down, the cheerful, tavern atmosphere had already been transformed into the curtained bleakness of a sleeper at night. The train roared and rattled.

I asked the porter to make down my berth. Now that I had become the quarry again after my brief fling as the hound, it seemed wisest to go to earth. While the porter was fussing around, I unearthed a toothbrush and went to the washroom. I wasn't going to risk exhibiting myself in the aisle.

There, in the washroom, I started thinking what Dorn's next move was liable to be. Would he try to kill me right away, here on the crowded ski-train? Surely not. A corpse in R. 18 would mean inevitable delay. And delay would be fatal to the rendezvous at 10 A.M. at the foot of the Ramp. No. It was far more likely that he would bide his time until we reached our destination.

That was a little comforting. With any luck I still had one more night to live!

When I got back to my place, my berth had been made. 'Henry James' had returned from the bar. His berth was being made down, too.

He grinned at me quizzically and said, in his Western twang, "You certainly walked out on those two blondes."

I grinned back weakly. I don't know why. Muttering, "Good night," I pushed back the green curtains of my lower and squeezed into my bunk.

I had decided against undressing. There is something so defenseless about pajamas. Flapping the curtains shut behind me, I wriggled over on the narrow bed, so that I lay flat on my back. I didn't relish the prospect of the night ahead of me.

If only I had brought something to read. I thought then of my friend in the lower berth across the aisle with his *What Maisie Knew*. Solid, sober Henry James. Just the thing.

I pushed my curtains aside. The little light was on in his berth. I called softly, "Hi."

He grunted in reply.

"I want to read. How about lending me *Maisie*?" I asked.

"Sure."

I saw his curtains tremble. Then his bare arm came out, stretching the book across the aisle. I leaned forward to take it. He was in pajamas. As he stretched toward me, the pajama sleeve crinkled up, revealing his bare arm.

I took the book. But I was hardly conscious of what I was doing. For, in the dim light of the sleeper aisle, I was staring at "Henry James's" bare right arm. Just under the wrist, where before it had been concealed by the buttoned sleeve of his ski jacket, I saw a blue, thin scar shaped like a half-moon.

Somehow my voice said, "Thank you."

The arm which fascinated and repelled me slipped back through the curtains. I slipped back through my own.

Maisie was quivering in my hand like a feather in a high wind. So much for my brilliant deductions from cigarette butts and overheard conversations! So much for my fool's venture to the bar! All the time Stephen Dorn had been the man in the lower next to mine—the young man with the tousled hair, the intelligent eyes, and the friendly smile, the one person on the train whom I had been prepared to trust.

And I had trusted him because he spoke with a Middle Western accent. As a detective I was still a good play producer. Naturally, if you had a voice as distinctive as Dorn's you would disguise it when traveling incognito. A Middle Western accent is not difficult to assume.

I didn't sleep much that night. For hour after rattling hour, I lay there reading *What Maisie Knew* grimly. Every now and then I dozed off. But not for long.

I was awake when the first finger of light crept through under the curtain which screened the window. I was awake an hour later when the Ski-Monarch slowed down, shuddered, and stopped. I glanced at my watch. 7:30 A.M. We had arrived.

For a few moments I lay there, collecting myself against the day. This was where the danger really

began. In two and a half hours the "transfer" was to take place. Some time during those two and a half hours, Dorn and Dickie—where was Dickie?—would presumably make an attempt to remove the one person whom they thought of as George and Hilda's associate. Those two and a half hours craved very wary walking by Peter Duluth.

Most of my fears had gone with the night. I felt almost calm—for myself. But I didn't feel calm for Iris. Somehow I had to get in touch with her, let her know who Dorn was, and warn her to keep the hell out of it.

Around me I was conscious of the dull, morning voices of awakened sleepers. There were clatterings in the aisle. I pulled back my curtains. Across the way, Dorn's curtains were still drawn. Here was my chance.

I slipped out, shaking some of the night creases from my ski clothes. I picked up my rucksack, slid *Maisie* onto the floor outside Dorn's lower, and joined the earliest skiers who were searching for their own skis in the bristling ski-compartment.

VI

THERE WAS A dramatic thrill to that first moment of Bermont. Virgin slopes of snow stretched around us indefinitely, dwarfing the little New England station and the straggling village into child's toys. And

beyond, gleaming-white and pine-tree dark in swathes, were the mountains.

I could make out the massive bulk of Laurel Mountain. And, yes, behind it, squat, ugly, pushing up like a great thumb—the Ramp.

Three busses were crouched in the snow behind the station to take us to the Mountain Inn at the very foot of the Hurricane Trail. Around me, skiers were crowding toward them, their breath making gray balloons in the crisp morning air. I followed, scanning unfamiliar faces urgently for Iris.

I reached the busses. There was no sign of her. And then she came around the side of the station, beautiful, self-possessed—and accompanied by her Scandinavian.

I started toward her. Scandinavian boyfriend or no, I had to warn her about Dorn. I had almost reached her, almost opened my mouth to speak, when she saw me. And, in a flash her face went cold and unyielding as stone. For one second her eyes pierced straight through me.

Then swiftly she turned to the Scandinavian. She smiled at him. In a loud, distinct voice she said, "A perfect skiing day, Dickie. Oh, Dickie, I'm so excited!"

Dickie! With a certain wildness, just in the nick of time, I swerved away. Iris linked her hand through Dickie's large arm and they got on one of the busses.

I stood there in the snow with

my skis, my nerves jangling like cowbells. So this was Iris's train pickup. Somehow she had identified Dickie from the start, and that was the reason for her high-powered vamping act. It hadn't just been to make me mad! The fool, the crazy little fool—didn't she realize the danger?

At that moment I felt a hand on my shoulder, and there was Stephen Dorn. He looked at me with those slanted, intelligent eyes beneath the tousled hair.

"Well, how did you enjoy *What Maisie Knew*?" he asked.

"She knew too much," I said.

He smiled that frank, boyish smile which now, to me, was infinitely sinister. "So did Hilda," he said.

So he was coming straight out with it now! There was to be no more pretense. We stared at each other squarely, there in the snow—two antagonists measuring each other's strength.

I'm afraid he won. I was still too jittery about Iris. He slipped his arm almost affectionately over my shoulder, the arm with the half-moon scar under the ski-jacket.

"I'm going to enjoy this ski-trip. Come on. Let's get on a bus."

On the bus he sat next to me, bottling me up against the window. And for all of the fifteen miles of journey through the snowy roads to the Mountain Inn he talked to me banteringly, glancing at me out of the corner of his eyes. Stephen Dorn

certainly knew his war-of-nerves technique.

Not that my nerves needed any extra work. Iris had completely undermined me. I could take care of myself, even with a toy revolver. But the idea of Iris playing with fire made me almost sick with apprehension. How to get her out of it? I couldn't even speak to her now without tripling the danger for her.

As the bus and Dorn rattled on, I thought wildly of calling the police, whatever the cost to myself. But I saw at once how hopeless it would be. I had nothing against Dorn.

I thought of Juliana and Huysmans then. And I clung to the thought of them like a drowning man to a floating beer keg. Juliana and Huysmans knew what this fantastic thing was all about. Judging from the \$10,000 check, they were as desperately eager as I to sabotage Dorn. Then cooperate with them.

They weren't on our bus. But when we reached the Mountain Inn—a huge, rambling clapboard affair nestling in the shadow of Laurel Mountain—I managed to shake Dorn off in the throng of skiers.

I pushed my way into the crowded lounge, with its heavy beams and bright, welcoming fires. Breakfast was being served, and most of the skiers were headed for the dining-room.

Then I saw Juliana and Huysmans. They were hurrying up the stairs with a bellboy, bag-laden.

I glanced at my watch. Almost nine o'clock. Only an hour to go. Not caring whether Dorn saw me or not, I dashed up the stairs. I saw the bellboy coming out of a room at the end of the corridor.

I ran to it. The door was still open. Without even knocking, I pushed through it, skis, rucksack and all.

Juliana and Huysmans both swung round. Juliana's exotic face went blank, and then white with anxiety. "Peter—you here!"

Huysmans was staring at me, as impassive as ever. "I advised you to keep out of this, Mr. Duluth."

"If I could keep out of it do you suppose I'd be here?" I hadn't much of a plan. Rather wildly I said, "You've got to let me in with you. I'm in danger. My wife's in danger. You've got to tell me exactly what's going to happen at ten o'clock at the foot of the Ramp."

Juliana looked Dutch and voluptuous and hostile. Huysmans said coldly, "It is nothing that concerns you."

"It concerns me plenty." I saw a telephone by the window. I went to it, theatrically. "If you don't tell me I'll call the police and report everything I know."

Huysmans knew I was bluffing. He didn't bat an eyelid. "If you call the police, Mr. Duluth, I shall let them know that you are wanted in New York for the murder of George Anstey."

That had me stopped. Outside

the window the great bulk of Laurel Mountain reared up, with the sheer white strip of the Hurricane Trail sweeping dizzily down its side, to end in a wide slope just back of the hotel porch. Farther off, looming squatly behind the flank of mountain, I made out the Ramp.

That made me conscious of the time element—desperately. I took a brodie. "It's no use holding out on me, anyway. Because I know. It's diamonds, isn't it? Dorn's smuggling diamonds in from Canada. And you're trying to stop him."

I went on jerkily: "At the moment Dorn thinks I'm his enemy, that I'm the person who bought off Hilda and George. That's why there's danger to me. What if I told him you were the people really to watch out for? What about that?"

That approach only came to me on the spur of the moment, but it worked like a charm. Juliana gave a stifled gasp.

Huysmans looked, for him, almost emotional, "So it is your turn now, Mr. Duluth, to be aiming the revolver. If you were to make Dorn suspicious of us, it would be so disastrous that—" he shrugged wearily. "Exactly what is it you want?"

"Safety for my wife and myself. And the whole dope on the transfer at the foot of the Ramp."

"I have no way of ensuring your safety." Huysmans moistened his lips. "And there is no need to tell you about the transfer, since you seem to know already."

"Then it is diamond smuggling." I felt suddenly exasperated. "Here I have been framed for murder, shot at, hounded into an impossible situation—just because a bunch of crooks are squabbling over hot diamonds."

"You also managed to make ten thousand dollars out of your misfortune," said Huysmans acidly. I didn't tell him Iris had torn up the check. "And I would prefer not to have you call us crooks. Miss Guilder and I are here with no thought of personal gain. We are only doing what little we can to help our native country."

I stared. "You—you mean you're foreign agents or—?"

"No, Peter, nothing so dramatic. Just ordinary people trying to keep bad things from getting worse." Juliana came to me, laying her hand on my arm urgently. She looked beautiful then—and nice, too. I almost understood why I used to like her.

"You know, Derek and I were both born in Holland. You know the ghastly thing that has happened to it, swallowed up by an enemy army, crippled—"

"Juliana," cut in Huysmans sharply.

"Oh, let me tell him. If he knows the truth he'll have to see how important it is." Juliana's eyes were pleading. "Yes, Peter, diamonds are coming across the border at ten. Thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of them. But they're not

just diamonds. They're the lawful property of the Dutch government, diamonds appropriated by the invaders. Derek still has an underground way of contacting Holland.

"A few weeks ago he heard about it—heard that the diamonds were being smuggled over to Canada by enemy agents posing as Dutch refugees. They're going to be sold here in the States. Smuggled across and sold for American dollars. Dollars that are infinitely important for the enemy."

I'd thought of it as a purely personal thing of crook against crook. This, with its overtones of general calamity, was something far more terrifying.

"And Dorn," I stammered, "is the man who's going to take over the selling of them in this country?"

"Yes." Juliana's voice was fierce. "Stephen Dorn isn't really a professional criminal. He's much more dangerous. Very intelligent, utterly cynical, ready to work for anyone, provided there's enough in it for him. Anstey and Hilda Purvis were small-time crooks working for him, posing as private investigators.

"Their job was to contact potential purchasers, and they were stupid enough to go to Derek. That's how he got onto Stephen Dorn. And, just by paying them more, we won them over to our side. They got murdered for it yesterday. But we got the information, and Dorn doesn't suspect we even know."

Huysmans came forward, still very stiff. "Perhaps you see now what you would be doing if you warned Dorn, Mr. Duluth. You would not only be dealing Holland yet another crushing blow, you would also be seriously injuring your own country by letting thousands upon thousands of dollars of American currency fall into the hands of a foreign and hostile power.

Huysmans looked at me earnestly. "As an American, apart from anything else, I can surely rely on you not to warn Stephen Dorn."

That made my own personal problems, however perilous, seem rather small. "Of course you can rely on me. But if it's as big as this, you should get in the police."

"We are taking all the necessary steps, Mr. Duluth." Huysmans' voice was very cold. "Perhaps I can ask one more favor. Since Dorn is suspicious of you, it might be fatal if you were seen talking to us. I must ask you to avoid us completely in these crucial moments."

He paused. "As for your personal safety, you have blundered into something far more important than you. And you must blunder out again. I can advise only one thing: Take a room and lock yourself in—until this is all over."

"But—" I began.

"There is nothing more to say."

I couldn't have been dismissed more peremptorily by Queen Wilhelmina herself.

VII

I SLIPPED OUT OF the room and moved down the dark, deserted corridor to the head of the stairs. In the vestibule below I could hear the festive chatter of skiers departing for the Hurricane Trail. I knew the secret now. Grim and crucial as it was, at least it made sense. I was no longer drifting in a world of darkness and mystery.

But things were no better. Somehow Juliana and Huysmans had taken "all necessary steps" to get Stephen Dorn. Presumably without the aid of the police. If they succeeded, that would be dandy for Holland, dandy for everyone—except me. My fingerprints in Anstey's apartment would still involve me hopelessly with the law, and Dorn was still as great a menace as ever.

And then there was Iris—Iris, in her casual, girlish way, flirting with an international crook and in mortal danger.

I looked at my watch. Nine-fifteen. Only three quarters of an hour to go. I felt a sort of engulfing panic. While I had been fussing with Huysmans and Juliana, Dorn and Dickie had probably already started on their way to the Ramp. And Iris! My heart was thumping. What of her? She was just crazy enough to have followed them.

Huysmans or no Huysmans, there could be no locked room for me until Iris was safe. Recklessly, not caring whether each and every

step on the Mountain Inn staircase was mined, I started down to the vestibule.

As I went, I scanned the crowd of skiers below for Iris. I didn't see her. But I saw something infinitely less nice.

Lounging at the bottom of the stairs, with their skies over their shoulders, watching my descent calmly, were Stephen Dorn—and Dickie.

I couldn't have avoided them, however, much as I wanted to. Dorn came up the stairs to me. He smiled straight into my face with that frank, friendly smile, that smile which said, "I've got everything figured out, and wouldn't you like to know what it is?"

"I thought we'd lost you for good, Mr. Duluth," he said silkily. The Middle Western accent had been packed away with Henry James now. This was the real, smooth, cultured, unpleasant voice. Dickie came up behind him.

Dorn turned to him. "And this—in case you haven't identified him already—is Dickie Swanson."

I suppose it was instructive to know that Dickie's name was Swanson. He showed a lot of white Scandinavian teeth and grinned at me. I was thinking: At least, Iris isn't with them. That's something. At least, they can't do me any damage in the crowded vestibule. That was something, too.

Stephen Dorn was still smiling. "Well, Duluth, since you've come

all this way to be with us, we weren't going to start without you. Come along, and we'll take the Hurricane Trail together."

I stared stupidly.

"Don't be worried," said Dorn. "I assure you we neither of us have guns. See for yourself." He propped his skis against the banister and raised his hands mockingly over his head. Dickie did the same thing. Although it was all quite mad, I—in Alessandro's parlance—"frisked" them both. Neither of them carried a revolver.

I was struggling to find some sense somewhere when suddenly everything went out of my mind. Because I saw Iris. She was pushing through the skiers, her skis over her shoulder, coming straight toward us. I tried to shoot her a warning glance. She paid no attention. She came up the stairs, slipped her arm through Dickie's, smiled at him dazingly.

"Here you are, Dickie," she said. "Come on! Let's get out on the trail."

Swanson looked awkward, and I was gripped by sudden alarm. "Well," Dickie began, "you see, I kind of promised these—"

"Lovely!" Iris was radiantly calm. "Let's all go together. And, by the way, introduce me."

Flushing a deep red, Swanson mumbled some name for Dorn. And Dorn, as calm as Iris, nodded to me and said, "This is Mr. Duluth."

"Not *the* Mr. Duluth!" Iris

quoted Amanda Bell, round-eyed. "The most divinely handsome important man on Broadway!"

I had to take it. I wanted to scream at her. But I couldn't do anything. That was the agony of it. It was all up to Dickie Swanson and Stephen Dorn. Which meant, of course, Stephen Dorn.

He took it in his stride—horribly in his stride, as though Iris's demented injection of herself suited his plan to perfection.

"Fine, Miss Rowley," he said. "Come on! Let's all get going."

So there I was, hog-tied. I couldn't cry off and let Iris go on alone. I had no choice but to take the plunge. My own idea had been to keep my wife out of danger. And this was what she had done to me!

We all put on our skis. We started for the tow—just as if we were ordinary skiers instead of two murderers, their would-be victim, and their would-be victim's lunatic wife in disguise. All the time, that one thought was hammering in my head: What is their plan? How does Iris affect it?

We passed the broad practice slope at the end of the trail, which was already crowded with the less ambitious skiers, and went on to the tow. It started some hundred yards from the foot of the trail itself and went through a cutting in the trees straight up the side of the mountain.

To me there is always something rather macabre about a ski-tow with

its animated clothesline moving slowly, remorselessly upward with a kind of skeleton El. Now, as we waited our turn, gripped straps, and started being pulled up, I had an exaggerated dentist's waiting-room sensation.

Each foot up, each minute that slid by, was taking us nearer—what?

Bobbing ahead of us on the tow-line, were the Hokinson woman and her two boyfriends. Turning back, looking dizzily down toward the hotel, I saw—of all people—the blond Amanda Bell and the blonder Gloria West hanging on their straps like seasoned experts. And I had assumed that their only skiing had been done on magazine covers.

Iris was ahead, then Dickie, then Dorn, and then me. The other three were chattering calmly about Tele-mark versus Christie. I couldn't bear it. The rest of that trip up the mountain was a kind of blur—a nightmare blur.

We reached the top of Laurel Mountain and joined the little group of skiers standing there, smoking cigarettes, chatting before they took the plunge down the trail. Through the lightly falling snow there was a breath-taking eagle's view of the valley, and, beyond it, the sister range of mountains, wooded and bare in strips, over across the border in Canada.

About fifty yards below us the bare slope became wooded and the

mouth of the Hurricane Trail yawned darkly through the trees. And to our left, lower than us, the peak of the Ramp was visible—bare, treeless, and infinitely lonely.

One after another, the skiers started dropping away down the bare, snowy slope, headed toward the mouth of the Hurricane. I saw the Hokinson woman go off with her two men, swinging her hips in as pretty a set of Christies as I hope to see.

But none of it seemed real. It was all part of the horror fantasy of Dorn, Dickie, Iris — clustered around me, smoking, laughing.

I glanced at my watch. Dorn saw me glancing. Twenty of ten!

And then Dorn said, "Well, let's at it. Dickie and Miss Rowley, you start the ball rolling. See if you can't race him, Miss Rowley."

Iris looked at me then. I looked at her. I could read nothing in her expression. "Okay," she said. "Fifty cents on it, Dickie." And she glided away down the slope.

Dickie glanced at Dorn, hesitated a moment, and then started off with a flick of his black ski poles.

I watched them, thinking of every possible disaster. Iris was in beautiful form, skimming like a swallow. Dickie was good, too. But not as good.

Dorn and I were there. We weren't alone. There was still a little huddle of skiers around us. He smiled at me.

"There's more than fifty cents on

our race, isn't there, Mr. Duluth? Much more." He gave a derisive little bow. And he was off.

I stood there, staring stupidly. Nothing meant anything any more. Iris and Dickie had slid into the mouth of the trail, out of sight. Dorn was skiing like a wizard. Elegant as they come.

Then, behind me, I heard familiar, ecstatic voices: "Peter, darling! . . . Yoohoo, Mr. Duluth . . . *"

Amanda and Gloria. That decided me. I slipped my ski poles off my wrists into my palms, pushed forward, and followed down the slope after Dorn.

I was a bit unsteady at first. Nerves, mostly, and lack of practice. But soon the feel of the skis against the snow surface brought me confidence. The mouth of the Trail loomed closer. I stemmed into it. It was fairly narrow and dazzlingly white between the dark walls of pines. But the first stretch was straight for a couple of hundred feet.

I was just in time to catch a glimpse of Iris's ski suit before she disappeared around the far bend. I saw Dickie lagging behind her. And, not so far in front of me, Dorn.

I followed, the crisp air whistling past my ears, my eyes glued on the two skiers ahead. And then, just before he reached the bend around which Iris had vanished, Dickie swerved left and zoomed down a sidetrack out of sight. A couple of seconds later Dorn reached the

same spot. He too, stemmed sharp left—down the same little trail.

I saw their game then. At least, some of it. From the start they had planned to take the Hurricane tow and tack off cross-country to the Ramp. And Iris, who had injected herself against their wills, had been neatly shaken off. By lagging behind, Dickie had eluded her. Now she was going on down the Hurricane Trail, racing like mad to win her fifty cents. She was safe!

That gave me a wild sense of exhilaration. The little sidetrack grew closer and closer. Dorn and Dickie had deliberately taken me along with them. They had left me to ski last. They had made no attempt to hide their turnoff from me. That meant, almost certainly, that they wanted me to follow them—into some trap.

But I didn't care then. Iris was safe. They didn't have revolvers. They were only two against one. And if, by some miracle, I could outsmart them at the eleventh hour, the hopeless tangle of my relationship with the world, the police and the devil might be straightened out peaceably—forever.

Of course, there was danger. Stephen Dorn was smart, for one thing. But my blood was up then.

Recklessly I swerved into the turnoff.

It wasn't a real trail, just a narrow path through the trees. Dickie and Dorn were not in sight, but their tracks stretched clearly ahead of

me. My heart jumping, I started to follow them, weaving to and fro, going as fast as I could. Soon I had left the Hurricane Trail, with its life, its other skiers, its safety, far behind.

Suddenly the woods stopped and I was on a bare, snowy slope with a vast panorama of the Canadian mountains, dominated by the great bulk of the Ramp to my left. The ski-tracks headed straight down the slope. I could see them plainly plunging down and, at the foot, sheering left around a thick patch of hemlocks, out of sight.

A slight rise at the end of the slope kept me from seeing what lay beyond. But I didn't pay much attention, anyway. All I cared about was the tracks, veering left toward the Ramp.

I pushed off and started schussing down the slope. I picked up immense speed. It was thrilling just as a physical sensation. Careening down, I reached the spot where the tracks swerved left around the hemlocks. I went into a glide, zooming around the hemlocks, losing scarcely any pace.

And then it happened. In one terrifying split second I saw the dead limb thrown across the track ahead of me; in that same split second I saw that the ground to my right dropped sheer away in a precipice:

If I had stopped to think, to plan, I would have swerved or crashed and been lost. But I didn't. Obeying some blind instinct, my arms went

out, my poles dug into the snow barely six inches from the limb, and, throwing myself up in a gelaendesprung, I cleared the hazard and landed on the other side of it. I tried to go into a Telemark stop, but I failed and collapsed sideways into the hemlocks.

It was only then, as I lay panting and tangled in the hemlocks with the danger past, that I had time to be terrified. There was reason enough. The track was scarcely five feet wide and completely blocked by the limb. Pushing myself up, I peered over the edge of the precipice. There was a straight drop, a drop which no human body could have taken and remained intact.

So this had been Dorn's little plan for my demise! This was why he had been able so ostentatiously to dispense with guns! Very clever and very simple for anyone who knew the terrain as they must know it. I had been deliberately lured into following. And then, ten seconds to drag the dead limb out of the hemlock outcrop and throw it across the track were all Dorn had needed to stage a hazard with a hundred-to-one chance of hurling me to my doom.

And a most ingenious doom, too. My body, if it had crashed over, would have been lost to sight in the snowdrifts below probably for weeks. And, even if it were found, the death would almost certainly have been written off as just another skiing accident.

That the miracle had happened and I had escaped without a bruise was just so much bad luck—or good luck, depending on how you looked at it.

The ski tracks stretching unbrokenly onward along the edge of the precipice showed me—much to my relief—that they hadn't waited to see their prey fall into the trap. This omission must have been due either to Dorn's overweening confidence or, which was more likely, to the fact that they hadn't been able to afford the time. After all, it was almost ten o'clock.

As I stood there, still breathing jerkily, I stared down the trail ahead. There was one little rise, and then beyond it, thrusting out to the right, stretching down into a desolate valley, the Ramp itself.

The northern foot of the Ramp! There it was right in front of me. Graciously, by failing to kill me, Dorn had given me a ringside seat. Without moving an inch from the shadow of the hemlocks, I would be able to witness the transfer itself.

And then, as I watched, two small, black figures came into my range of vision from behind the little slope ahead, two figures skimming down the long slope of the Ramp toward the valley—Dorn and Dickie.

And, perfectly timed, as if obeying some theater cue, I saw a third figure, far up the slope on the other side of the valley, a solitary skier, tiny, dwarfed into nothingness by

the immensity of the surrounding waste.

This, then, was the transfer! Vaguely I had expected melodrama—Juliana, Huysmans, hoards of customs men on skis swarming in all directions.

And there was just this. Two figures skiing down one slope. One figure skiing down another. I saw then how classically simple and inspired Dorn's plan had been. Two lone skiers casually meeting a third—"by chance." Two skiers going back to their harmless ski-party. Two skiers enjoying a pleasant week end at the Mountain Inn. Two skiers returning inconspicuously to New York on a holiday ski-train.

If it hadn't been for the watchful patriotism of Juliana and Huysmans, the venality of George and Hilda, and my own fool's blundering, who would have guessed that in those mild, everyday incidents a vast, illicit fortune had changed hands and countries?

Dickie and Dorn were almost at the foot of the Ramp. Suddenly they disappeared from sight behind a little rise I hadn't noticed before. The lone skier had almost reached them. He, too, disappeared.

Almost before I realized it, I saw the lone skier again plodding his way back up the slope he had come down. And then, a few seconds later, there were Dorn and Dickie starting back up the Ramp.

The transfer had been as easy as that!

VIII

THE "ACCIDENT" AND the transfer had followed each other in such swift, distracting succession that there had been next to no time to think about my immediate future. Now, suddenly, its urgency was forced upon me. What to do!

Almost certainly Dorn and Dickie would return this way. They would want to get back to the Hurricane Trail and, certainly, they would have to inspect their trap.

It was then that the idea sprang fully fledged into my mind. It was a crazy, wild idea, but there was a chance of its coming off.

Dorn and Dickie were coming past this actual spot with the diamonds on them. And they expected me to be dead. Okay. I would be dead. It was very simple. My tracks where I had jumped the limb were pretty scuffed up, anyway.

I scuffed them some more, taking them right to the edge of the precipice. Then, a final artistic touch, I tossed my ski cap down in the melee, as if it had flown from my head as I went careening to my doom. When I was through, the tableau was pretty convincing.

Now all I had to do was to ambush myself in the hemlocks. They had no revolvers. I had a toy revolver. People had held up banks before now with toy revolvers. Why shouldn't I be able to hold up Dorn and Dickie? Not only hold them up but hustle them back to the hotel

at pistol point and hand them over to the police. With them safely behind bars as smugglers and with a full report on the murders from me, I might yet come out of this affair unscathed.

Juliana and Huysmans, in spite of their assertions, weren't doing anything visibly constructive. And they had given me the sneer direct when I'd offered to help them, while Dorn had constantly and insultingly underestimated my ingenuity.

Well, I'd show them all. Iris's words of last night rang triumphantly in my memory: *Theatrical producer rounds up gang single-handed!*

I could still see Dorn and Dickie plodding up the side of the Ramp. It would be a good ten minutes before they reached me. I took off my skis. That way I was more mobile. I hid them in the hemlocks and then slipped in among the soft branches, myself.

I took out my prop revolver. It looked lethal enough to me. I felt excited and gay. This was where Peter Duluth crashed through.

The next ten minutes, while I lurked with my gun in the hemlocks, were a sort of pins-and-needles infinity. And then Dorn and Dickie came gliding up so noiselessly that I barely heard them before they slipped into my vision. Then I only saw them in patches, Dorn's profile and shoulders, Dickie's broad back and his brown bamboo ski poles. They had stopped by the limb.

Dickie said, "Look; the tracks going over the side and his cap!" He sounded rather awed. "It worked. He was as dumb as you said he was, Steve."

Dorn, calmly, said, "Shove the limb over the edge, Dickie. We don't want anyone to see it. It might give them ideas."

The two of them slipped their poles onto their wrists, stooped, and sent the limb toppling over the precipice. That seemed to be my moment.

I stepped out of the hemlocks. And aimed the prop revolver. "Not quite as dumb as you thought," I said. "How about handing over those diamonds and taking a little trip back to the hotel?"

They both stared, Dickie's Scandinavian face going blank with apprehension, Dorn's registering nothing except a rather nasty amusement. His slanted, intelligent eyes dropped from my face to the revolver.

"Neither am I quite as dumb as you think, Duluth," he said. "I know a prop revolver when I see one. Now, this, for example—" There was an ominous pause. Then he felt in his pocket and produced a gun.

"This little number," he said, "which my friend across the border just gave me is much more the real thing."

He aimed it at me, smiling. The toy revolver dropped limply from my hand.

"Now," Dorn said. "We will have the unusual privilege of eliminating you twice."

Dickie was grinning. They both were. Exasperation and shattered pride almost engulfed the realization of danger. But not quite. I had enough sense to appreciate the fact that, once and for all, the fool's venture was going to be over.

"Since our first idea was a good one," Dorn was saying. "I think we might repeat it. Put on your skis. And then you can give us a little exhibition of a skier falling accidentally over precipice."

I thought wildly of turning and running. But that was hopeless. Even if they didn't shoot me, they were on skis and I was on foot. Apart from the little clump of hemlock there were no sheltering trees nearby. They would be certain to catch up with me before I could get back to the Hurricane. I pulled my skis out of the hemlocks and put them on.

The revolver was still pointing. "Now, Mr. Duluth, go around the hemlocks onto the slope. Go a little way up to give the necessary momentum, and then—over the top."

I obeyed, because I had no alternative. I started herring-boning up the slope, wondering if anyone else had ever had their life come to so humiliating an end. Dickie and Dorn had come around the hemlocks too, revolver and all.

"That's far enough, Mr. Duluth."

The moment had come. I started

to turn. And then, miraculously, like the sound of angel voices, I heard little screams and titters.

At first I couldn't believe them. Then definitely they came again. Little girlish laughs and cries: "There they are! Peter, darling! Yohoo-oo!"

I couldn't believe it. I looked up the slope ahead of me. Deep organ music seemed to flood through me in ecstatic diapason. There, schussing, stemming, weaving down the slope toward us were three beautiful, glamorous females. One of them was blonde, one of them was blonder, and one of them was dark. And she was the most beautiful.

Amanada, Gloria—and Iris.

I glanced derisively over my shoulder. I saw Dorn's face white with fury. I saw him hesitate and then—of all things—toss the revolver over the precipice. And then, in a wild group, the girls were upon us. Christieing into stops, chattering, clustering around us.

"Peter, how *divine*!" caroled Amanda.

"Mr. Duluth, how *too* divine!" caroled Gloria.

And Iris—Iris skied down to the distracted Dickie. She slipped her arm through his with a pouting grimace.

"Dickie, you should be ashamed, and you owe me fifty cents. I got all the way down the Trail before I knew you'd quit. And I'd never have found you if the girls"—she waved at Amanda and Gloria—

"hadn't seen Mr. Duluth take the turnoff. We all came up on the tow to find you."

It still didn't seem real. "Yes," said Amanda. "All you men getting together! Come on; let's have some fun." She nestled against me. "And, Peter, Gloria and I can't wait to hear about the play."

I stared stupidly.

"Yes," put in Iris. "I was just telling Amanda and Gloria how you'd said you might have parts for them in your new play, Mr. Duluth. That's why we were all so keen to come and look for you."

I cottoned then. Dear Iris, divine, inspired Iris! What a magnificent way to save your husband. With a barricade of blondes. No one, not even Dorn, could eliminate me, one brunette, and two blondes.

Iris had done the greatest triple table-turning in history.

Stephen Dorn and Dickie still seemed entirely without a plan. Iris was pulling Dickie forward. "No excuses this time. We'll all make the trail together again. Amanda, you take Mr. Duluth; Gloria, you take the other gentleman."

She laughed gaily, and went on: "And see none of them get away this time, girls. No more men's talk for them."

It worked. It was as simple as that. Each of us guarded by a beautiful and determined wardress, we started up the slope, we got to the top, we weaved down the little track through the trees.

And, almost before my pulses had stopped fluttering from my narrow escape, we all of us debouched onto the Hurricane Trail, with its infinitely desirable skiers, skiing past us, epitomizing the great, big world of safety again.

"Come on, boys and girls." Gloria was dragging Dorn forward. With a coy little giggle she pushed him, and he started off down the slope. She went after him, schussing to keep up, like an expert.

"Dickie, it's you and me. And another fifty cents on this." Iris was smiling ineluctably at Dickie. He started off, too, unhappily. She followed.

"Come on, Amanda, *darling*." Amanda and I started off in pursuit, her blonde hair gleaming like a canary's wing. I'd never loved anyone more in my life. Scarcely anyone. Only Iris.

Probably no one has ever gone down the treacherous Hurricane Trail with more abandon. In almost no time it seemed we had schussed, zoomed, hurtled down, and broken out onto the practice slope, which stretched, bright with skiers, down to the hotel itself.

I saw Dorn and Gloria ahead, going like mad. I saw Iris and Dickie, too. Dickie was a little ahead. Iris was speeding after him. Then suddenly, another skier loomed in front of her. She swerved, and crashed straight into Dickie.

The two of them fell, sprawling in a pile of flying ski poles. But Iris was

up like lighting, grabbing poles and off down the slope in a regular whirlwind. She seemed to be taking her fifty-cent race seriously.

So did Dickie. He was haring after her. Amanda and I joined in the chase.

Our velocity was so great that we skied straight over the flatlands, right up to the hotel porch. Amanda and I were only a minute or so after the others. I saw Dorn and Gloria reach the porch. I saw Iris, with Dickie hot in pursuit, reach it too, and then veer off around it, out of sight.

Then, just as Amanda and I were fifty feet from the hotel, everything seemed to go mad. The porch doors were thrown open. I saw two familiar figures: Juliana and Huysmans. And behind them, in an indefinite hoard, crowded men in official uniforms.

Customs officers!

Juliana pointed dramatically at Dorn and Dickie. They made a feeble attempt to ski off. But the customs men bristled with guns.

"Those are the men!" exclaimed Juliana. "Those are they. Arrest them."

And they were arrested. It was as simple a business as you'd ever seen. Before Amanda and I reached the porch, both Dorn and Dickie were surrounded by customs men.

"Search them!" ordered Huysmans crisply. "Skis and all. Take them inside."

Dorn and Dickie were taking off

their skis under official aegis. Customs men were leading them, skis over their shoulders, into the porch. They disappeared.

It all couldn't have taken more than a couple of minutes.

So this was what Huysmans had meant by "necessary steps." It *had* involved the authorities. They had known Dorn and Dickie would come back to the hotel. They had known Dorn was suspicious of no one but me. And, all the time I had been risking my neck all over the map, they had been sitting quietly at home with a swarm of customs men!

Amanda was staring in horrified amazement. "My!" she said.

That was as good a reaction as any.

I got rid of her, took off my skis, and hurried through the porch into the big vestibule lounge. Juliana and Huysmans were there. I was just in time to see the customs men shepherding Dorn and Dickie into an inner room. No one else was around except a hovering manager and a few waiters. All the skiers were out on the trail.

Juliana saw me, and looked anxious. "Peter, you were out there, too!"

"I certainly was."

Huysmans came to me. He said urgently, "you mean you actually saw the transfer?"

"From a distance."

"Thank heaven. Then the customs men will get them, all right."

He hesitated. "There's a private drawing-room off the corner there. Come with us, Mr. Duluth. I want to hear everything."

We went into the private room. While they listened intently, I told them what had happened.

Huysmans wasn't at all sympathetic. "Really, Mr. Duluth, how ridiculous! We had our plans set ever since we left New York. I told you that. The customs men had been contacted. We felt certain that Dorn's scheme was to come back to the hotel with the diamonds. We came up to be able to identify them, and the arrest was prepared to catch them red-handed. The other man across the border is being arrested, too." He was keyed up. "You might well have thrown everything out of gear."

That was all the credit I got for risking my life in every possible position. Sourly I said, "You didn't confide in me. How was I to know? I didn't even think you were going to bring the authorities in at all."

Juliana looked a little sorry for me. She said brightly, "Well it's all turned out for the best, anyway. And you were half right about the police. We didn't want to call them, in the first place. Our country needs funds quickly, very quickly. Now there'll be all sorts of delays, red tape, proving the real ownership of the diamonds, customs complications, the trial. It will slow things down. But we had no choice. This seemed the only safe way."

Huysmans was looking jerkily at his watch. "The captain of the customs men will report to me as soon as the diamonds are found."

We slumped into half-hostile, jittery silence. I was just beginning to realize the exquisite fact that it was all over. A nice little arrest, lovely diamonds for Holland, and peace for Peter Duluth. I thought nervously of the murders. Would Juliana and Huysmans be able to pin them on Dorn's gang, too?

That thought stayed like a gnat in my brain during that indefinite period while we waited for the customs captain. At last one of his men came. He looked rather flustered.

"Captain James says will you come out into the vestibule," he said.

We went out. Captain James was there with five other uniformed men and Dorn and Dickie. James looked as flustered as his minion. Dorn and Dickie looked very calm.

James said, "Mr. Huysmans, this is kind of awkward. We arrested these men on your tip-off because you said they had a lot of diamonds in their possession which they'd just smuggled over the border. We've searched 'em, clothes, skis, poles, everything. And we know how to search. We can find no diamonds on them at all."

Huysmans went white. Juliana went whiter. I felt almost the whitest of all.

James glanced at Dorn and

Dickie. "Under the law, I have no authority to hold these men at all. They're carrying no guns. Nothing."

There was a very excruciating pause. I visualized Dorn being free, visualized the whole mad business starting up all over again. And I couldn't understand it. They *must* have got the diamonds from the lone skier. I had actually seen them meet. And they couldn't have hidden them on the way home. They hadn't had the chance, nor had they had any idea that the customs men would be waiting for them at the hotel.

Huysmans, utterly shaken, stammered, "Perhaps—perhaps they managed to conceal them somewhere along the trail. Yes, couldn't you hold them a little longer? Hold them until your men have searched the trail? They're dangerous criminals, I tell you. And the issue at stake is vital—vital."

James looked doubtful. "Well, maybe we could hold them a while and let the boys—"

Just then the manager twittered up and said, "Phone call for you, Captain James."

James went away, and came back shortly. He looked rather stunned. He said to Huysmans, "You said there men are Stephen Dorn and Dickie Swanson?"

Huysmans nodded blankly.

James scratched his head. "If this ain't the craziest thing! That was the station calling. Phone message just came in from New York

to arrest two guys Stephen Dorn and Richard 'Dickie' Swanson. Some guy, Alessandro something or other, was picked up in Washington and he did a lot of talking about double murder."

Dorn stiffened. I gulped. I didn't believe it. Things just didn't come that pat.

"One of them, Dorn, has a scar on his right wrist, it said."

I gulped again. The captain went to Dorn and pulled back his ski-jacket sleeve. "Well, I guess this fixes it." He grinned at the startled Huysmans. "Sorry about that phony diamond charge, but it turned out dandy. Thanks for getting our men for us."

While we all preserved a staggered silence, there was a glint of handcuffs. Captain James and his followers hustled Dorn and Dickie Swanson forward and out of the hotel.

It was over—just like that.

IX

WE ALL THREE sat down limply. We were still limp a few minutes later when Iris came into the vestibule. She had her skis and her light-brown bamboo ski poles over her shoulder. She was humming a bright little tune. She came up to me smiling affably.

"Won't you introduce me to your friends?" she said.

I was still too dazed to think. I made mumbled introductions. Iris

nodded to Huysmans and took Juliana's hand. "So pleased to meet you, Miss Guilder. My husband has told me so little about you."

Juliana and Huysmans, deprived of their diamonds, were too dejected to react.

Iris said, "I just saw a lot of customs men, darling. What were they doing?"

"Arresting Stephen Dorn and Dickie Swanson for George Anstey's murder," I said. "Alessandro was caught in Washington, and broke down. It's absolutely crazy. The maddest coincidence. I don't understand what—"

Iris sat down, propping her skis and poles against a pillar. She looked very lovely and very solemn. "It's not exactly a coincidence. I kind of figured it would come through about now."

I stared. I said, "What in heaven's name—?"

"It was quite simple really," said Iris. "I thought about it yesterday while you were asleep. After all, we knew Alessandro was going to be hanging around the Sherry-Carlton in Washington, waiting for you."

"Yes, but—"

"So I called the New York police anonymously. It's surprising how charming they are to anonymous voices. I told them if they wanted to get a slant on the Anstey-Purvis murders to arrest a dark-haired man called Alessandro at the Sherry-Carlton in Washington. I gave them a description.

"I then said they could probably get him to confess if they told him that his confederates—Stephen Dorn and Dickie Swanson—had just been arrested on the Ski-Monarch. I told them to tell Alessandro that Dorn and Swanson had turned state's evidence against him. I told them that when Alessandro broke down they'd be able to have Dorn and Swanson arrested up here.

"I told them about Dorn's scar, so they could identify him. Apparently it all worked out all right."

Iris looked at me placidly. "After all, fun's fun. And it was all right haring up here in the ski-train. But I thought it would be more comfortable for you if they *were* arrested for the murders in the end."

I stared at her. She'd saved my life in the craziest possible way. And now, by an even crazier way, she'd managed to have Dorn and Dickie arrested by remote control at the most crucial moment. Someone, I thought, should put up a monument.

Huysmans and Juliana were staring at her. She was as entirely unruffled as ever.

"Now, Peter, I've been dying to hear what it's all about. What was this transfer? And how are Mr. Huysmans and Miss Guilder involved?"

I stared again. I blurted, "You—you mean you don't know?"

"Of course I don't know. How have I had a chance? At Grand Central I managed to locate Dickie. It

was the sheerest accident. He was in the crowd ahead of me and I heard him saying, 'It's no use waiting to hear from Alessandro.' So I clung to him. Then I saw you'd been smart enough to pick up Dorn. But I never knew what it was all about. No one would ever tell me a thing."

Skiers, attracted by news of the customs men and their arrest, were streaming into the vestibule. I said, "Let's all get back to that drawing-room."

We did. Iris followed patiently with her skis and ski poles.

I told her everything then, every foolish thing I had done, the story Huysmans and Juliana had given me—everything. Juliana joined in, too.

When we'd finished Iris looked at Juliana. "So it really was as big as that. Diamonds that belong to the Dutch government?"

Juliana nodded miserably. "You can't imagine what a blow this is for us, Mrs. Duluth. We've been working night and day; we've had only that one desperate hope that we'd be able to get them back. And now, at the last minute, everything seems to have slipped out of our fingers."

Iris tossed back her dark hair. "And you didn't really want to bring in the police? You say they would have delayed everything. And your country needs the diamonds right away—needs the money?"

Juliana nodded.

Iris looked thoughtful for a moment. Then she said, "Bali's Dutch,

isn't it? I've always wanted to go there. It would be a shame not to have it properly defended." She got up slowly and, crossing to her skis, picked up one of the bamboo poles. "Queen Wilhelmina's kind of sweet, too."

While we three stared blankly, she started unscrewing the end of one of the poles. It came off. She shook the pole. Fantastically, like something out of the *Arabian Nights*, diamonds started pouring

wouldn't have snatched the poles. But, since I did snatch them, I leave it up to you. Tell the police; don't tell the police; pay them a conscience-money check for the customs amount. Do what you think's best."

I was asleep. That's what it was. I was asleep and dreaming. "But, Iris, how—?"

She blinked. "Really, darling, nothing could have been easier. Didn't you notice Dickie's poles?

NEXT MONTH

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE THRILLER

DETOUR TO MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The Miami detective was heading for home when the by-pass sent him through Palm Manor and the murderer of little children.

out of the hollow bamboo, sparkling and glistening on the pretentious Turkish carpet. I'd never known so many diamonds existed.

Juliana gave a little scream. Huysmans rose unsteadily.

Iris went on pouring. She looked up. "There are just as many in the other one," she said. "Of course, if I'd known the police were going to arrest Dorn and Dickie, I

His and Dorn's were black hickory when they started out for the Ramp, and Dickie's were brown bamboo when they came back. I noticed them immediately.

"Since I knew someone was going to get something from somewhere, and since the whole thing was tied up with skiing, anyway, I knew what we wanted had to be in them."

Black hickory—brown bamboo. Vaguely I had noticed. But I'd been too dumb to realize its vital significance.

"I had to get them," said Iris, "so I knocked Dickie down on the ski-slope and managed to grap his poles instead of mine in the tangle. I suppose it was crazy. He was after me and he'd probably have caught up with me if they hadn't arrested him. But"—she shrugged—"no one else was doing anything, so I thought it was up to me."

Juliana and Huysmans were gazing hypnotized at the diamonds. I was gazing hypnotized at Iris.

I said, "Darling, I don't believe in you. You're not real. You're just too—too damn' resourceful."

She grimaced. "There's nothing a girl won't do for the man of her choice."

Huysmans had turned to her. His lips were trembling. "Mrs. Duluth, I don't know—I can't say—"

"Don't be silly," said Iris. "I didn't do anything. Only messed things up. You'd have gotten your diamonds, anyway."

"But—but this facilitates... With the diamonds actually in my

possession, it will be so much easier with the authorities. Mrs. Duluth, isn't there some way I can show my gratitude?"

"Certainly not." Iris looked righteous. "You gave my husband a ten-thousand-dollar check, and we tore it up. There's an old family motto: No Duluth takes money he hasn't earned."

"Nonsense!" said Huysmans. "Nonsense! I would have had to pay Anstey that much, and more, for the information your husband brought me. And talking about not having earned it—I insist. I shall write another check immediately."

He started fumbling out his checkbook, and began to scribble at a desk. Iris looked at him. She looked at the diamonds. She looked at me.

"Well," she stammered, "if—if you insist." And then: "And since my husband's rather impractical—perhaps it would be wiser to make it out to me."

She turned to me. She took my arms. She looked impossibly beautiful.

"Hot dog!" she breathed. "Hot diggity dog "



MAN on the RUN

by
**DENNIS
LYNDS**



DETECTIONE LIEUTENANT Frederick Jacoby lighted a cigarette and watched the white-uniformed attendants carry the body from the dingy hotel room. Then Jacoby looked to where the Coroner was still working on the other man. The second man had a bullet in his chest and had a hard time breathing or talking. Jacoby had just finished listening to the man.

"He almost made it out the door," Detective Sergeant Allers said to Jacoby.

"He almost made it all the way to Rio," Jacoby said.

"I still don't get it all Fred," Allers said. "I mean, how come Maxie came back to New York any-

●
"Yeah, I done the job, copper. I got Little Maxie. I'm a big man, copper!"
●

way. He should of known he'd get it here."

"He had a plan," Jacoby said. "A smart man, Little Maxie. The careful type, never worked without a plan."

Allers looked puzzled. "This was a plan? Some plan!"

"A hot tip, Sergeant, real inside information. Maxie probably paid plenty to check it out. The only trouble was he didn't get the whole picture, you know?"

Jacoby had the wounded man's story, and the Lieutenant could imagine the rest without much trouble. Jacoby smoked his cigarette and thought about Little Maxie and his hot tip.

LITTLE MAXIE LIMA had been on the run for three months when he decided to work on Walter Midge. That was something new for Maxie, being on the run. It was usually the other way around. Since he had killed his first man with an icepick when he was sixteen, it had been the other men who ran while Maxie chased. Maxie got one hundred dollars for that first killing—a man had wanted his wife out of the way and Maxie went into business.

Since then his methods had improved and so had his pay. Maxie could kill you any way you could think of, and do it expertly, quietly, without a trace of evidence.

That kind of talent does not go to waste. Little Maxie was twenty when he filled his first contract for

the Syndicate. The trouble was that Maxie liked his work too much. He filled private contracts on the side, the cops came down on him hard, and the Syndicate decided that Little Maxie Lima was no longer a safe property to have around. They put out a contract on Little Maxie himself, and Maxie started to run.

It was new to Little Maxie, running. Not from the cops, he was used to having the cops after him. There were a lot of places to run and hide from the cops. But there was nowhere for Little Maxie Lima to hide from a contract. So he ran.

He was a careful man, Maxie, he had some money put away in selected locations. That gave him the price of three months running. But Little Maxie would not have taken a lead nickel for his chances. He was a practical man, a realist, and he knew how much chance a man had when there was a contract out on him. No chance at all. Unless he could get far out of the country with enough money to hole up in some quiet place where the local police could be bought. And that was when Little Maxie Lima thought of Walter Midge.

There were only five ways Maxie knew to get money, the kind of money he would need to go far enough and be safe enough: killing, stealing, borrowing, gambling, and blackmail. No one would hire him to kill a fly now, and the small-time stealing he could do safely on the run would not get him to Brooklyn

from Manhattan. He had no stake for gambling, and if he had ever had any friends he didn't have any now, so borrowing was out. That left blackmail.

The little killer was in Los Angeles at the time he thought about Walter Midge. In his room he actually smiled. Next to murder Maxie liked blackmail the best, especially the blackmailing of a fellow crook. There was more risk, more brains were needed, when you blackmailed a fellow criminal, and that gave Little Maxie a lot of pleasure. Outsmarting them was almost as much pleasure as killing them.

In that Los Angeles hotel room Maxie started to work on outsmarting all of them, Syndicate, cops, and Walter Midge. He rolled a cigarette of cheap pipe tobacco in a strip of torn newspaper and began to think.

There was a risk in going back to New York. Maxie had to weigh that against the safety of, say, \$20,000 and a ticket to Brazil. That was the first step for any good businessman—weigh the gain against the risk. Maxie was a good businessman and this time there was no question. Without money they would get him within two weeks—the cops would if the Syndicate didn't. But Maxie had to be sure Walter Midge was his man.

All he had was one piece of information—inside information. A very hush-hush rumor said that big, dumb, Walter Midge, a hanger-on at Big Frank Arcarti's crap game in

New York, had driven the get-away car of the big Newark armored car robbery four months ago. Only a rumor, but Walter Midge was just the kind of man Little Maxie himself would have used to drive a get-away car.

But Maxie was the careful type, he wanted to check it out. The only man the little killer could think of who would know and who might still talk to him was Manny Gomez in Chicago. Maxie put his .38 in his pocket and headed for the airport.

MANNY GOMEZ seemed glad to see Little Maxie. But not glad enough to forget that talk is cheap and information costs money. Manny smiled, but it cost Little Maxie a twenty dollar bill.

"Yeh," Manny said as he checked the twenty to be sure it was good, "I heard about Walter. I tell you, Maxie, it's a hard one to figure. Word says he drove the car. He spilled to a broad, told her all about how he worked on a big job, told her what a great driver he was. She told some people Walter said stick with him and she'd be big. He's spending, but not spending much. Not real loud, you know, but more then he ever had. He moved to a better pad. He gets his suits pressed now, and he walks big."

"A dame?" Little Maxie said. "Walter never had a real dame in his life. They laughed at him."

"One ain't laughing," Manny said.

"Maybe she just likes him," Maxie said. "What kind of dame?"

"Not cheap, not high-price, you know?"

"The cops?" Maxie said.

"I heard they talked to him, but I ain't sure. If he didn't talk himself I wouldn't know nothing," Manny said.

"Walter always did have a big mouth," Little Maxie said. "Okay, Manny, and thanks."

"What's a pal for," Manny said.

Back in his Chicago hotel room Little Maxie thought it all over. It was still only a tip, hot information, but it fitted, it made sense. Walter was just the kind of bum for a job like that. Walter was the kind who would spill to a dame, and Walter had money now. It was logical. Little Maxie liked logic. He was going over it again when he heard the noise.

A noise like a button hitting metal. Outside the window on the fire escape. Maxie held his breath, then took out his .38 and flipped off the safety. He glided like a ghost across the room to the window. Flattened against the wall beside the window, Maxie waited. He did not have to wait long.

The man was in the room almost before Maxie realized that the window had been opened. Little Maxie admired professional work, the man moved almost as silently as Maxie himself. The man was good, but not quite good enough.

Little Maxie hit the man expertly

behind the ear, and the man went down and out. Maxie thought about his "pal" Manny Gomez.

Maxie checked the fire escape. It was empty. Maxie dragged the man into the light. A stranger. It was always a stranger. He searched the man. Not a cop. Maxie sat back in a chair and waited for the visitor to revive. He rolled another of his newspaper cigarettes and smoked until the man groaned, rolled over, and started to get up. Little Maxie waved his .38.

"Stay down, friend. Against the wall, hands flat on the floor. Right. Now don't move and maybe you'll live."

"You won't, little man," the man said.

"Maybe, maybe not," Maxie said. "You're pretty good, but the fire-escape was a dumb play. You get this close to a mark you got no business blowing the play. How come you tried a dumb move, friend?"

"We all ain't as good as you, Maxie," the man said.

"You got a point, friend, only you ain't that bad either, right? Now the way I figure it is you tailed me to Manny Gomez. When you talked to my pal Manny, you figured I was working some angle and maybe I'd get away, right?"

"If you're gonna shoot, shoot," the man said.

"No hurry," Little Maxie said. "Yeh, that's it. You know something and you figured you had to

move in fast. I got brains, friend, that's the score. I ain't perfect. Manny talked, right?"

"About what, little man?"

"Walter Midge, friend, and my ticket out."

The man on the floor sneered. "Midge? That looney? How's Midge gonna get you out? That two-bit bum ain't even any good on the door of a crap game."

"I hear he ain't on the door no more, I hear he's in the game now," Maxie said softly.

The man on the floor showed no reaction, maybe a faint blink of the eyes, but Maxie did not expect to see a reaction. The man said, "You hear too much. So Midge ain't on the door no more, so he rolled some drunks and came up with a few bills."

Maxie hadn't been sure Walter Midge wasn't on the door of Big Frank's game any more, now he was sure. And the man on the floor had made a dumb move because they were worried. That meant they knew about Walter, too. If Walter was still alive. You had to figure all the angles, weigh the facts. They knew about Walter, but only this guy knew that he, Maxie, knew about Walter. This guy and his partner, he had to have a partner. The partner would be watching the front.

Maxie said, "So Walter's a loony, eh? He never had any money, he never worked a big job, that's your story, friend! You never heard of

the big job, you don't know nothing?"

The man laughed. "Walter? A big job? You must be off your rocker, little man."

"It figures you'd con me, friend, it figures. Only you can't, see? You ain't got the brains."

"You're runnin' scared, little man," the man said. "Go ahead, run! Shoot me, and run, see how far you get."

"Shoot? You must really think I'm dumb," Maxie said "Where's your partner, out front?"

The man raised his hands and lunged to his feet. Little Maxie brought his hand from his pocket, his left hand, the one that was holding his knife, not his gun. The man gasped once and fell.

Little Maxie moved swiftly. He hauled the man's body to the window and pushed the man out. Then he turned and ran from the room and down the stairs to the lobby. As he expected, the lobby was empty, the last few people were running into the street.

Maxie slid out and walked silently in the shadow of the building to the edge of the crowd.

A cop was bending over the body of the man Maxie had killed. Little Maxie searched the faces in the crowd. He spotted his man. He could not be certain, but the man was trying to get close and yet not too close.

Maxie walked close up to the man. He touched the man's coat

under the left arm. The man whirled, his right hand inside his coat. The man saw Maxie and his hand came out and there was a gun in it.

Maxie smiled and stabbed the man expertly. The man slumped into Maxie's arms. No one in the crowd had seen it all. Little Maxie staggered away with the man until he reached an alley. Then he dropped the man and ran.

NO ONE SAW him arrive in New York. There had been no one waiting at La Guardia. But it was only a matter of time. The moment he checked into the flea-bitten West Side hotel it was even money the cops would know he was in town within three hours, the Syndicate maybe an hour earlier. They would find him tomorrow at the latest.

Maxie figured he had maybe fifteen hours if he changed hotels every five hours and never stayed in the same place more than two hours. That was the way it was, Maxie liked to face facts. He had to move fast. Fast and careful. You had to balance them just right to beat the Syndicate and the cops.

His first stop was Eddie the Wasp's cigar store. The fat stool pigeon took one look at Maxie and began to sweat. "They'll kill me for even talking to you! They got the word about Chi."

"Walter Midge, Eddie," Maxie said. "The cops after him?"

The fat man sweated in rivers

in the cold. "They rousted him two months ago. I don't know why. I put out an ear but I got no message. Three days they had him inside. Gimme a break, Maxie, that's all I heard."

For Little Maxie it was enough, it all fitted now. "Where is Walter?"

"Who knows? He's been playin' in Big Frank's game, you know? And he moved like. Maxie, what'd he do? I mean, once in a while he talks about a big job, how he's in the know. He's spendin', you know?"

"The cops don't know, how should I know."

"Cops're dumb," Eddie said.

"So dumb they got to use a stoolie as stupid as you," Maxie said. "Okay, now you get a message to Walter. You tell him Little Maxie wants to see him about a big job, a driving job, got that? You tell him it's me and a big job. And, Eddie, if anyone except Walter knows I'm in town I'll be back for you."

"Sure, Maxie," the fat stoolie said.

"Okay. You get Walter here, and you get him to call me and ask for Alice, just Alice. That's all."

Little Maxie gave Eddie a Chelsea number, and turned on his heel and walked out. He did not have to worry about Eddie yet. Later, when Eddie thought he was safe, but not yet.

Maxie walked across the city to the Sixth Avenue bar that had the number, the Chelsea number, he'd

given Eddie. He waited back in a dark doorway across the street until he was sure Eddie had called no one else. Then he crossed the street and went into the bar.

There were two men in the bar, and the bartender. Maxie covered his face as he passed the two men. He ordered a beer. A clock above the bar read ten o'clock. The little killer figured he had maybe ten hours left. He began to smile to himself. He was going to make it. With a break. He was on his third beer when he noticed that there was only one man sitting at the bar now.

Little Maxie jumped up and headed for the door. The telephone rang. Maxie hesitated, he did not know how long the man at the bar had been gone. It was a chance he would have to take. If he missed Walter this time it would take hours to make another contact, and Maxie did not have many hours. He went for the telephone.

A deep voice said, "Alice?"

"Okay, Midge, meet me in the alley behind the Belden hotel in a half an hour. Come alone, I'll be watching."

The voice seemed to hesitate. Then the voice said, "It this Maxie Lima? The hired gun?"

"Yeh, Midge, so be quick. It's a big job."

Little Maxie hung up and ran for the door. He was a half a block away when he looked back and saw the car drive up to the tavern. Two men got out and went into the sa-

loon. In the distance Maxie heard sirens coming closer. The man from the bar had called everyone. Little Maxie walked faster and smiled in the night. His luck was holding.

He waited in the dark of the alley for Walter Midge. From where he stood he could see the mouth of the alley lighted by a street lamp. There was a blank wall behind him. The doors into the alley were all unlocked, Maxie had checked that. He had his escape route, and no one could sneak up on him. He lighted a cigarette as he waited, sure he had checked everything as usual.

The big man appeared at the mouth of the alley. Midge was almost a giant, and as broad as a wrestler. Little Maxie watched Midge walk down the alley. The big man seemed to move slowly as if afraid of something, hesitant. Little Maxie stepped out and shined a quick light on the big man.

"That's far enough, Walter."

Midge stopped. The big man's eyes blinked in the light. There was a thick cigar clamped in Midge's mouth. The big man's suit was good and pressed. His shoes were shined. Midge looked prosperous enough. Maxie shut off the light.

"You said you got a job," the big man said in the dark.

Maxie stepped close to the big man. "A driving job, Midge. A bank, you drive the get-away car. You can handle that kind of job, right?"

The big man seemed to hesitate

again. Then his voice from the dark said, "Maybe I can, maybe I can't."

The tone of the voice had changed, become, suddenly, arrogant. Midge's voice was arrogant and wary, the voice of a man who is not sure how much he should admit, but who didn't care if someone guessed what he had done. Midge saying, "Maybe I can, maybe I can't."

"I know all about it, Walter," Maxie said.

"All about what, Lima," the hard voice said.

Maxie laughed. "Don't try to con me, Midge. The robbery, I know all about it. What was your cut, ten percent? That'd be one hundred grand more-or-less, right? You ain't been spending that much, you been taking it real easy. I figure you got most of it left."

The big man's voice was harder, cagy. "You got big ears, maybe you know too much."

Little Maxie said, "Don't try it, Midge! I got a gun in my hand, and a knife in my pocket. You know who I am. I could kill you ways you never heard of, and no one the wiser."

"What do you want from me?" Walter Midge said.

Little Maxie smiled to himself. "Let's say you got seventy-five grand left, I'll take about twenty-thousand bucks of that. I'm being good to you, that's less than half."

"Why should I pay you?"

"Because I know about the rob-

bery. I figure it's worth ten thousand dollars I don't tell the cops, they'd listen to Maxie Lima, believe me. You fooled them once, only this time they'd have the tip from me, and this time they'd keep you inside until you rotted."

Maxie went on: "The other ten grand is for not telling the Syndicate boys. You don't pay, I tell the cops and the Syndicate boys. If the cops don't lock you up and throw away the key, someone in the Syndicate is gonna get the idea of helping you spend that dough, right?"

There was a long silence this time. Little Maxie took a tight grip on his .38 and waited. At last the voice of Walter Midge said, "You'll tell them? The cops and the Syndicate?"

"I will," Maxie said. "And don't think about knocking me off. In the first place you couldn't do it, in the second place that's a murder rap and twenty grand ain't worth a murder rap to a guy like you."

The silence was longer this time. The little killer went over the whole thing in his mind. The kind of man who drove a get-away car for ten percent of a big robbery was not the type who would kill anyone if he could help it. Maxie knew all about killers, and robbery drivers were never killers if they could help it.

Little Maxie was sure of that. It wouldn't do the big man any good to turn him in to the police. And the big man was too dumb to know that Little Maxie wasn't about to

talk to the Syndicate. If Midge knew that, the big man would have walked out already.

The big man's voice said, "You'll tell the Syndicate?"

"You heard me," Maxie said. "Here's what you do. Bring the money to the Valencia Hotel, you know where it is. Ask for Mr. Brown's room. Then you go straight up and wait at the room door, got it?"

The big man did not answer. Little Maxie was sure Midge was shaking his head up and down in the dark, but the big man did not speak, and then Maxie saw a shadow at the mouth of the alley. Maxie hissed, "Run!"

A voice called, "Halt! Police!"

Maxie was down and crawling away before the first shot was fired. The little killer never did see what happened to Walter Midge. Maxie knew the voice, Lieutenant Jacoby.

Maxie swore under his breath. The only way Jacoby could have known was from Eddie the Wasp. Eddie must have heard him on the telephone to Walter. He decided he would take care of Eddie after Walter paid the money.

There was movement at the mouth of the valley. Little Maxie fired four quick shots and made a dash for the nearest door. He went through the door in a sprawling dive, landed, rolled, and came up running. One last shot missed him by a hair as he went down a laundry chute in the hotel head first. He

came out in the cellar and was out the front way and running away in the dark before the police reached the cellar.

FROM THE SHADOWS Little Maxie watched Midge cross the street and go into the entrance of the Valencia Hotel. The big man was carrying a brown-paper wrapped package. The little killer waited in the shadows. Light was just beginning to break in the sky to the east.

Dawn soon, and Maxie had already checked on the nine o'clock flight non-stop to Brazil. They had a seat. Now he waited across the street to see if Walter Midge had decided to try to be smart.

Fifteen minutes passed, but no one else went into the hotel, no one drove up and parked on the block.

Midge was playing it straight, Maxie knew Walter himself was no danger, but it payed to be sure, and Maxie checked his .38 before he put it in his pocket with his hand on it and ready. Then he walked across the street and into the hotel. He had played it all as smart as it could be played, now his luck just had to hold another three hours.

In the hotel he walked up the stairs. Walter Midge was waiting in front of the door of the room he had taken in the name of Brown. Maxie walked up to the big man and pulled out his .38. "Hold still!"

He carefully searched the big man. Midge was not carrying a weapon. Maxie had been sure, but

it paid to figure on everything. Maxie said, "Okay, come on."

"Where?" Walter Midge said.

"Just come on," Maxie said. He led the big man down the stairs to the next floor. He took a key from his pocket and opened the door of an empty room.

Maxie grinned. "In case you told anyone. I got the key and checked the room being empty while the clerk was off buying me some whisky, for a small tip, of course."

The big man walked into the room and Little Maxie locked the door behind them. Maxie still held his .38, just in case, but he was not worried about the big man. And he had decided not to kill Midge later. Sudden killings were dangerous, too much could go wrong. A shot in the hotel was too risky, too many people. With a man as big as Midge a knife was chancy.

The main thing was that Little Maxie did not want a killing to start the police checking the airports. Eddie the Wasp would have told them Maxie was looking for Walter Midge by now.

"Okay, Midge," he said, "hand it over and I'll blow."

The big man handed Maxie the package. Maxie laid his .38 on the bureau and tore open the package. And Maxie stared down at the neatly stacked and wrapped piles of cut newspaper. Not all newspaper. On each stack there was a single ten dollar bill. Little Maxie screamed at Walter Midge:

"Newspaper?! Why you stupid—"

The big man moved with amazing speed. Midge was half way to Maxie before the little man knew what was happening. The big man shouted, "You ain't gonna tell! You ain't—"

Little Maxie grabbed for his .38. His mind was racing. The shots would bring the cops if the big man's shouts didn't. It was crazy, stupid!

The big man came closer. Maxie fired before his gun was steady. The big man grunted. But Midge did not stop coming. Little Maxie panicked. It was all wrong! It was stupid! Maxie ducked and ran. It made no sense, and the little killer reached for the door in panic.

The big man's hands closed on his throat. The .38 fell to the floor. Little Maxie tried to breath, but the fingers crushed his throat. Maxie heard shouts and running feet in the hall. He tried to scream, but his throat was twisted and nothing came out.

Blood rushed up behind Maxie's eyes and his mind screamed over and over—*it don't figure, it's stupid, it don't figure, it don't . . .*

And Little Maxie Lima died trying to think of what had gone wrong.

DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT Fred Jacoby looked down at Walter Midge. The big man was breathing hard with the bullet in his chest.

Jacoby said to the Sergeant, "So Maxie put his gun down and when Midge rushed him he couldn't get it up fast enough. It looks like he panicked. He couldn't figure what went wrong."

"Midge was lucky," Sergeant Alpers said. "He gonna make it?"

"Maybe," Jacoby said. "I don't figure he cares."

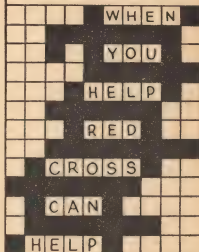
The Coroner, who was working over the injured Walter Midge, looked up at Jacoby. "He's got a chance."

"That newspaper trick was smart, but risky," the Sergeant said. "Me, I'd of given Maxie the money."

"What money?" Jacoby said. "Walter never went near a big robbery in his life. You're as bad as Maxie. The newspaper wasn't a smart trick, Walter really thought it was twenty thousand dollars. That's why the tens on every stack. You heard him tell us what happened? He still thinks he was in on the robbery, drove the car, and brought the money to Maxie. It's a delusion, he wants to believe it. The only thing he doesn't know is why he killed Maxie. If he had really been in on the robbery he would have paid Maxie not killed him."

The Coroner stood up. He looked down at Walter Midge. "He had to kill Maxie or face up to his delusion. If he let Maxie tell anyone about the robbery the part of his brain with the delusion would have to admit it was only a delusion. So

it's really no puzzle



his subconscious killed Maxie to protect its delusion, so it could go on believing what it wanted. I'll bet Maxie still can't figure it out wherever he is."

Jacoby said, "Maxie should have asked me. We checked Walter two months ago. We'd head the same rumors. It turned out he inherited some money, he'd rolled some drunks when it was real safe. The big criminal, just a delusion. Poor Little Maxie."

"You mean he killed Maxie because he *didn't* do the robbery?" the Sergeant said. "It's crazy."

"A crazy delusion," Jacoby said. "He had to protect his delusion. He still doesn't know why he killed

Maxie. He knew Maxie had nothing to tell but his mind couldn't admit that."

The Coroner put on his hat and coat as the stretcher arrived from the ambulance. As they went out behind the stretcher with big Walter Midge on it, the Coroner said, "If he lives it's Bellevue. He can still think he's a big man there."

"You know," Jacoby said, "he did the job on Maxie for the Syndicate. Maybe they will even pay him."

On the stretcher Walter Midge struggled to raise his head. The big man gasped out, "Yeh, I done the job, copper. I got Little Maxie Lima, I'm a big man, copper."

"How'd you do it, Walter," Jac-

oby said, "with his own thirty eight I'll bet."

Walter Midge lay back on the stretcher. Then the big man smiled like a child. "Yeh, that's right, I done it with his own gun." The big man smiled like a happy child, and then, suddenly, the big man scowled and his eyes narrowed as he stared up at nothing. "Maybe I did it, maybe I didn't, copper. You get me my lawyer. Yeh, that's it, my lawyer. I ain't talking."

Lieutenant Jacoby closed the ambulance door behind Walter Midge and watched the ambulance drive away in the cold morning. A jet flew over the city high up. On it way to Brazil maybe, Jacoby thought to himself. Poor Little Maxie.



COMING SOON

DENNIS LYNDS

ARTHUR PORGES

JAMES HOLDING

NEW STORIES BY

MICHAEL AVALLONE

JOHN J. MCGUIRE

ALSON J. SMITH

THOMAS CALVERT McCLARY

MINK is for a minx

by

TIGHE JARRATT

*The mink coat switch gave Stack
a chance to mingle with the plush-
bracket Westchester set. And mingle
he did—with thief-catching aplomb.*

CHIP STACK oggled the cabana photo of the glamorous Mrs. S. E. T. Harrison for a full minute, gave three seconds each to the pages of the insurance report, and returned his lecherous thoughts to the photo.

"A minx without a mink is like a fish without its scales," he said. "I'll bet she has been raising hell."

Richard Ramsey, chief of

Claims and Settlements, rattled the check on his desk. "Seventeen thousand dollars worth of hell, and I have no excuse to hold up the settlement."

Stack snapped his thumb against the bottom of his cigarette pack to make one jump into his shark-shaped mouth. "You're being taken! That was the old coat check switcheroo, without trimmings. Some broad walked in

© 1963, by Tighe Jarratt

The Inimitable Chip Stack has a way with rackets—and women.



with a rat and checked it early in the evening. Then Mrs. Harrison arrived and checked her mink. The two met in the powder room or at the bar and exchanged coat checks. Then the broad walked out with the mink and left the rat for Harrison."

"The switch could have been a sleight," Ramsey said. "They're still some artists around who could take the dentures out of your mouth and stuff it with a baked potato. Or the coats may have been physically switched on the hangers in the check room. Or the check girl may have palmed Mrs. Harrison's proper check and sneaked it to some accomplice. There's a third possibility. In the confusion of the dinner rush, the check girl may have made an honest mistake and given the coat checks to the wrong parties."

"Or maybe the mink was a muskrat in disguise!" Chip Stack jeered.

Ramsey shrugged his bony shoulders. "In any case, we're liable and we're paying." He scaled the check expertly into the *Out-going* box.

"If you're settling, why call me in?" Stack grunted.

Ramsey removed his rimless glasses to polish them. "Because if the coat girl made an honest error in the rush and got the checks mixed up, then some career girl in the muskrat bracket is walking around with a seventeen thousand

dollar mink on her back—and she is not technically guilty of one damn thing. What we need now is the special aptitude of a shamus who will go to practically any length to get the clothes off some frightened woman's back. Naturally, we thought of you."

"I always cherish your high opinions of me," Chip acknowledged. "You boys want the coat back, but you don't dare go after it. What are you going to do with an old coat?"

"Return it to Mrs. Harrison with the suggestion she relinquish the new one she will have by then."

Chip Stack chortled. "You may know the insurance laws, but you sure don't know women! You'd have a better chance getting the settlement returned by her old man."

"The age of miracles is past," Ramsey said dryly. "He happens to be on the board of our own bank, and he didn't get there without learning that bona fide settlements cannot be repossessed. Just bring in the old coat and you'll earn your fee."

Stack poked on his hat and raised his chubby body erect with the surprising ease of a seal surfacing. "I have a terrific streak of chivalry," he confessed. "I'd much rather bring you in the money." He punched out his cigarette and moved toward the door with his rolling, carefree gait.

Ramsey's drill voice pinned him on the doorsill. "You might bear in mind that if you get arrested for blackmail, illegal entry, or named as a correspondent, we don't know you."

Chip Stack bowed. "A man appreciates that solid, old school-tie type of loyalty."

He sauntered around to the investigation file room and got the scuttlebutt on the check girl. Bonded without a question. Not a blemish on her record in six years of checking at the plush spas. Supporting a crippled brother. Savings account. No addiction to alcohol, drugs, or gambling. No steady boy friends—shady or otherwise.

And a real cute trick, fore, aft and sidewise. It was amazing what the files of an insurance company could produce.

Stack found Rosa Antonelli cleaning house, with a smudged nose, a towel tied in rabbit ears around her head, her skirts tucked up peasant fashion, her feet bare and dirty from mopping. It took a special type of girl to look good under those circumstances. She was the type.

She made him a cup of java, talking from the kitchenette. It was clear she was worried as hell over her bond and future jobs.

She called with a catch in her voice, "I suppose you think I made a mistake in the checks or the coats, too—unless you think

something worse! But I want to tell you, Mr. Stark, there was no mistake of any kind."

"Now take it easy, Rosa, and I'll try to clear you," he advised.

She brought his coffee, her eyes shining with gratitude. "I don't know why. Everybody else has good as called me a thief!"

He took her hand reassuringly and seated her opposite, where he could enjoy her knees. "Let's just recall the evening."

"Well, it was rushed, but I was alone on the check room. When I'm alone, I never handle more than one party at a time. So I couldn't have gotten any checks mixed up except right in the Harrison party."

She thought back a minute. "The Harrisons came in late. They had to wait for a vacant table at the bar. By that time, the back check racks were full and I was using the very front ones, with the check numbers near two hundred. Mr. Harrison's number was one ninety-two, for instance."

Rosa Antonelli spoke rapidly and had her facts in order. But of course, she'd already recounted the facts half a dozen times to police, routine insurance investigators, the bonding company, her bosses.

"The Harrisons were late leaving and there weren't many coats left. All the other coats were where they should be, on the front racks. But Mrs. Harrison handed

in check thirty-six, and it was the last coat on the back rack. You see what I'm getting at?"

Stack nodded. "She shouldn't have had check thirty-six to begin with. But if there had been some error in the check stubs, the coat for thirty-six should still have been on the front rack."

The check girl nodded, but tears filled her eyes. "I tried to say that, but nobody would listen. Mr. Harrison was sure I was a thief, and wanted me thrown in jail right then. And Mrs. Harrison was telling the manager that she'd certainly given me back the same check I gave her."

Stack laid a hand upon her knee to stop her. "Mrs. Harrison gave you her own check? I mean, in that kind of restaurant, isn't it usual for a lady's escort to carry both checks?"

"Yes it is and that's what I was trying to make her see—that some smart operator might have seen her tuck the check in her evening bag, and pulled something when she laid it on the bar, maybe. If she'd only listened, maybe she could have remembered who sat next to her or stood behind her or if she laid her purse down in the powder room—"

Rosa choked up suddenly. "But all they wanted to do was blame me!" she sobbed.

"Now," Stack said sympathetically, "I'm not blaming you, and

maybe you've solved the whole thing without knowing it."

"Oh, Mr. Stack!" She reached his hand impulsively and hugged it against her neck. "If you'd just tell that to the bonding company, I'd do anything—"

"*Hrrrrumm*," he nodded. "Well, I'll need quite a little help from you. Private and confidential, of course."

"Any time you want to see me," she agreed with the vaguest hint of color in her cheeks. "And I'll tell you something, Mr. Stack, if I had been stealing, I'd have wanted the imitation, not that lavish mink of Mrs. Harrisons."

"Do you have any recollection of the woman who checked the other coat?" he asked.

Rosa shook her head. "I've tried and tried but can't remember. But it was still a lovely coat, Mr. Stack. Compared with the Harrisons, she may have been dirt poor, but she still must dress very beautifully."

"Maybe you'll have a coat like that someday," Chip said, and smiled.

"Oh! I'd really do anything—" she burst out.

"*Hrrrrumm!*" he said again.

He made some chitchat to relax her and then took a taxi to his apartment, where he could pursue investigation reclining with a Scotch and phone. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that the culprit was Lili Harrison herself, in spite

of her husband's wealth. Women just didn't pick up their own coat checks when escorted by their husbands.

However, he double checked with some fairly reliable gossip mongers, and came up with what he expected. S. E. T. Harrison had been badly hurt in last summer's stock crash, and had been raising hell about household expenses ever since. He'd gone further and reduced the staff of his ocean-going yacht to a skeleton crew just big enough to keep the vessel in commission.

When a yachtsman was driven to that deprivation, he would certainly deny his wife the extravagance of a new coat he considered unnecessary. But Lili Harrison was not the kind to see it in that light. The mink was well known and four years old. She had always made a particular point of trading in for a new one a year ahead of the time interval that was customary with most wealthy women. The easy alternative to the impasse was to sock the insurance company.

As far as the method went, that was easy to figure. The question was, who had been her trusted confederate, or confederates, and how could she be sure of trusting them?

In this case, that factor alone eliminated her maid. It required well-oiled underworld connections to sell a coat like that, and a

maid would not have them. And she'd not dare wear the coat herself. So the coat would be valueless for purchasing her timeless silence.

Chip Stack mixed himself another drink and considered that the check girl had supplied that answer, too. She was the only one who had noted that the switched coat, although of very moderate value, must have belonged to a very well-dressed woman. The kind of a woman who could wear mink if she had the money. One who moved socially high enough so that her appearance in a re-finished mink would not arouse too much curiosity.

That sounded like some poor but social friend of Lili's, just the kind of friend a rich woman would have. That kind of a friend could be trusted eternally, because her own social position would be involved, and because she'd lose the mink if she made one slip. The old mink would be her reward for helping Lili Harrison gain a new one.

Chip Stack was satisfied with his picture and phoned an old friend who moved on the fringes of the Gold Coast crowd in Westchester. Adroitly, he learned that Lili Harrison had just such a playmate, a girl named Valerie Snowden, married to a fatheaded cousin of that prominent family, without the brains or gumption to make them a decent income.

What it boiled down to was that Valerie's good times were largely the result of knowing Lili Harrison. As might be expected with such a dumbun husband, Valerie liked her martinis and the ponies. She was damned good looking, too, the friend added.

That was too bad, Stack considered. He did have his streak of chivalry—he hated framing pretty women.

He hopped in his Mercedes Special and drove out to Westchester. The upper crust would not do their bar hopping at obvious, popular places, but such communities were invariably dotted by discreet little back lane bistros where they were relatively safe in letting down their hair. One such place always led to another.

It took four days and nine bars to pick up the haunts of Valerie Snowden. It was an unduly long time for Chip Stack to reconnoiter, but he was handicapped by not daring to mention the Harrisons or Valerie Snowden even casually. Just a whispered rumor that a stranger was interested in them might get that mink buried deeper than a skunk's hide.

He might have eased things by a little social name dropping, but that could be a trap, too. So he let himself appear in a character role that wouldn't expose him to too many risks—that of a well-heeled, self-made man on a little

loup while away from the wife. A man without any social pretensions, and quiet enough not to alarm the Gold Coast strata.

He was a good tipper and did much of his drinking in the off hours when the bartenders had time and freedom to talk, and it was the bartender with the passion for the ponies who first mentioned her. They'd been talking horses for two days when Chip Stack expressed the opinion that long shots were smarter betting than favorites.

"Now that's a funny thing for anyone who knows the ponies to say," the bartender argued. "But maybe there's something to it. We have a customer, a Mrs. Snowden, whose making a mink coat on longshots. She picks 'em, too. She's got it almost made."

"I'm not that good," Chip chuckled. "I ought to get her system."

Privately, he was blessing the devil for the break. He'd been growing afraid that she was a home drinker and kind of uppity wench who wouldn't speak to the hoi poloi. But it was now assured that she did make the rounds, and was not above chumming with a bartender, which meant that she often stopped by alone.

They had some more random talk and then a couple entered from the side door. The bartender confided with a mutter, "The longshot lady and her useless."

Seating herself, the girl looked Chip Stack over with the open curiosity of her kind about a stranger who had invaded a more or less private club. She and her husband joshed the bartender in friendly fashion while they had a martini.

Then leaving, she laughed, "Henry, you'd better pick a damned good long shot for me tomorrow. I've got everything but the collar on that coat!"

So, Chip Stack thought, she's using the ponies to set up the explanation of how she came by Lili's coat when she begins to wear it. Lili Harrison got her check and new coat. They figure the investigation's over, and all's clear now for Valerie as soon as she gets a new collar to disguise the coat around the home neighborhood.

He had another drink himself on that, and then drove in town and brightened the check girl's spirits with the report that the case was breaking and she'd soon be in the clear. But he'd still need her help for identification, of course.

At noon next day Stack opened the Westchester bistro, armed with a *Telegraph* and the scratch sheet. He'd also learned the name of a possible long-shot in the first, and he gave a ten to Henry to play on a split, just to prove his theory.

Henry phoned in the bet and

Chip had an eye-opener and brunch, and he was making up his day's bets when Valerie Snowden came in wearing flannel slacks which fitted her from all sides, which was an achievement among young matrons. She really had something. It was going to hurt Chip Stack to turn her in.

Henry had just served her drink when his bookie phoned back that the longshot had come in. Henry emerged from the phone, as excited as a kid. He explained to Valerie what the excitement was all about, and she made a face and complained that he hadn't acted like a friend in not including her in.

It was a three way conversation now with no suspicions raised, and Stack said that he didn't see much more he felt confident about today, but there would be some horses running tomorrow. The hitch was, he confessed, that he'd have to be in town and right at a bookmaker's to get the tips, and there wouldn't be time to phone her.

"But you probably know the spot," he added. "It's the upstairs lounge of the *Paraquet*, and they serve a better lunch than downstairs. I think half the women drop in more for lunch than for the bet."

She showed surprise. "You mean that plush spa is simply the front for a bookie—and I never even suspected it? Of course; I

know the place. It's very toni."

She looked at him speculative-ly. "If I were sitting right here waiting and Henry could make my bet right away, don't you think there'd be time for you to phone?"

"Well—" he murmured. "You know how it is. They have some private way of getting reports, but they probably don't like outgoing calls about bets."

She made a cute, wry face.

"But if you'd really like to bet," he said, "I'm driving in at noon and I have to be back here by seven sharp—earlier if possible. It's a pretty select spot. You wouldn't have to worry about being seen." He laughed good naturedly. "Unless it was being seen with me."

She thought it over. It was clear she was busting to cap her phoney story and have the excuse to wear the mink. She said, "No woman would feel self conscious about riding in a mercedes. But it's not a convertible, is it?"

"No," he agreed. "It's strictly wide open. You'd have to bundle."

"Well—" she said.

He watched the excited lights flicking through her eyes, and knew exactly what she was thinking. It was a chance to wear the coat in town before the collar was changed, where it wouldn't be recognized, and also the opportunity to package her excuse so that she could appear in the re-

modelled coat locally any time now.

"I'd like to go if you'll really be back by seven," she said. "But I'll have to be on the dot. I have to be at dinner at eight."

He made a gesture. "We'll hit 'em hard and duck back as early as you like."

Valerie Snowden studied him and relaxed even while he could feel her gathering excitement. But he knew damned well that she would not have made a date with a stranger except for the coat. It was a funny thing what a woman would do for a mink.

He met her next day at the shopping center where she parked her car. The day was cold and clear, and he'd set his trap right. She picked a luxurious mink off the seat beside her and pulled it on as she darted from her car to his and snuggled in the open seat.

The lounge of the *Parakeet* was loaded with women in mink, but Valerie drew special envious attention even from that crowd. They ordered lunch and made their bet for the second race, Chip Stack betting a hundred with the usual proviso that if it hit, half of it would be hers. He could sense her calculating what the bet would bring, her excitement growing as she realized that it would pay for the remodeling of the coat.

Chip Stack played across the board and when the horse romped

in for place, Valerie had a woman's usual reactions to soaring excitement and visited the powder room. It gave him the chance he needed to examine the coat under the lining, his practiced eye quickly finding the identifying marks of the furrier and the insurance code on the backs of the hides.

He could have ended the case there, either by turning her in or simply walking out with the coat. The insurance company hadn't asked for an arrest—simply for the mink. But she was a beautiful girl with excitement in her, and Chip's chivalry was fired by his romantic spirit. He said nothing until they were on the crowded highway returning—early, as he'd promised.

Then he said, "Well, I'm glad you came out winning. It may help to pay the lawyer."

Valerie Snowden sat up sharp, staring at him with sudden alarm. "Lawyer?" she repeated.

"You'll probably need one," Stack explained. "To get you out of the rap of stealing Lili Harrison's coat."

"So you're a detective!" she cried. She broke all to pieces for a moment, then caught herself in hand. But that one bitter challenge was the slip that confirmed his theory of the switch beyond any possibility of doubt.

"It isn't Lili's coat, and Lili

will back that!" she declared haughtily.

"It carries her insurance marks," he told her.

He saw her hand snap into a fist, but she was a cool one and she had her alibi. "If it's hers, I didn't know it," she bit out. "Somebody left it at the house one night, but I didn't find it until the other day and nobody had inquired about it. I didn't see how it could be Lili's, seeing that she lost hers at a New York restaurant, but I called her home anyway."

Even the best turn weasel when they're caught! he thought cynically. But she surprised him.

"She wasn't home, but I spoke to Seth—her husband. In fact, I'm still burning at his rudeness. He practically told me I must be drunk, that it could not possibly be her coat, and as she already had her new one, he didn't want to hear any more about it. Then he as good as hung up."

Chip Stack's mood brightened and he grinned with admiration. Those two cool chicks had figured Harrison out and involved him without his knowing it, just in case something did go wrong sometime, so that he'd have to stick behind them.

"So," she bit out with scathing anger, "if she got mixed up about the fur she wore to town that night, I can't help it. I wasn't the witness—her husband was."

"Well, it can be very easily settled, if your statement is correct," Stack said. "I'll just return this coat to her in exchange for her new one, and the insurance company won't come out too badly."

"But—but this is my coat now!" she cried with deeper feeling than the first fright had roused. "It is! *It is!* I didn't steal it. Lili's husband wouldn't even look at it, and no matter how it happened, it's mine as long as nobody claims it!"

"But I've already claimed it for the insurance company," Chip said quietly. "Unless you'd rather have me turn it over to the police."

"Oh no!" she breathed. Then she bent her face into her hands and sobbed the real sorrow on her mind. "But I'll never—*never* get another chance to own a mink like this!"

He let her cry a space and then he said, "Now, you might. You might even get to keep this coat."

Her sobs shut off like a faucet. Every fiber in her was listening.

"And Lili Harrison may also get to keep hers," he added. "If you've told the truth about the phone call."

"I have! I swear it! You can ask Seth!"

Chip Stack nodded. "I intend to. Now I'm going to take this coat over there and try to straighten this out so everybody's happy, but

you'll upset the apple cart with any phone calls."

"I won't do anything to hurt her!" she declared.

"This won't hurt her. She'll probably get to keep her new coat out of it. So you just clam up until things are settled."

"How will I know if I can't phone her?"

"She'll phone you damned fast. But if she doesn't, and you see her wearing her new coat after tonight, you'll know everything's worked out."

"And I'll get this one back?" she breathed.

He pulled up beside her car in the shopping center and looked at her. "Any time you want to come in town and call for it—it will be at my apartment."

She got the message. Scorn flashed in her eyes. But she didn't say no. She said, "You're a real fink, aren't you?"

"A fink for a mink," he grinned. "But mink are for minx." He gave her his card. "All the essentials. Just call me."

She wriggled out of the coat angrily, but she rammed his card into her pocket book. She crossed to her own car without another word, reached in and pulled on a sport coat. It was clear that she hadn't dared wear the mink from her home, so her alibi was phoney and the deal had been a criminal switch transpiring at the New York restaurant, as he'd felt sure.

He backed his car out and gave it the gun for Harrison's estate. He got a lofty reception from the butler. The Harrisons were dressing, the butler insisted.

"I think Mrs. Harrison will want to see me anyway," Chip Stack grunted. "I have located her lost coat."

She saw him fast and privately in her personal suite. She didn't even take time to don a more formal robe in place of the very alluring one in which she came, still damp, from her bath. She shot one glance at the coat and dismissed the maid and butler before she even looked at Chip.

She lighted a cigarette coolly and remained on her feet. "I suppose," she remarked tartly, "that is the coat poor Valerie thought might be mine."

"It is your's, Mrs. Harrison," he said. "You are probably not aware of the fact that valuable coats like this are furrier and insurance marked."

She sat down with abrupt anger and crossed her legs. Her negligee fell away, and she looked better than in the photo taken at Palm Beach.

He said, "Of course, if Mr. Harrison wishes to reimburse the insurance company for its settlement, the company will have no further interest in the coats."

"That miser would rather see me naked!" she declared.

Chip Stack has his own thought

about that, but restrained it. But it must have exuded from him like the beat of a tomtom, for she looked at him with sudden keen speculation.

"I'd rather burn up my mink than return it to the insurance company!" she said. "But maybe you have some alternative?"

Chip Stack looked directly at her bare legs. He said, "I think it could be handled quietly and without a report."

She smiled coolly and said nothing.

"I think perhaps I can persuade Mr. Harrison to make you a gift of your new mink," he said.

She inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out slowly. She got to her feet and crossed to him and lifted two fingers to tap his chin. "Try it. Maybe you're worth knowing," she said. "That is—if you succeed."

She gave a wry smile and opened the door to the hall. "If you'll wait downstairs, I'll have Mr. Harrison see you."

He handed her one of his private cards. "It will be a pleasure to see you again wearing your new mink."

"That is the only way you will," she said, and stood musingly watching him to the stairs.

In five minutes, Mr. Seth Harrison appeared in the library, arrogant and bad tempered from being disturbed at dressing. He start-

ed to threaten and bully from the height of his unassailable position.

Chip Stack let him run out of wind and then held out the coat on his arm. "Mr. Harrison, this is the coat that you swore to the police that your wife was wearing and lost at the *Gay Paree*. It was entirely on the strength of your identification that the insurance settlement was made. Now it has shown up at Valerie Snowden's, who says it was left at her house, and that she so informed you personally, but you refused to see it for possible identification."

Harrison turned purple, but he stood his ground. "If it was a mistake, it was a mistake that the insurance company accepted after due investigation! The only legal restitution that can be demanded is Mrs. Harrison's new coat."

"That would be satisfactory to the company, but it involves a detailed report of the circumstances. The report, of course, will have to emphasize your error of memory as to which coat Mrs. Harrison was wearing at the *Gay Paree*, and your peculiar attitude in refusing to see the coat Valerie Snowden found at her house. In fact, the report may require a brand new investigation."

Harrison's eyes spit fire, but his colored drained to grey.

"And you will probably wish to give your wife a new fur soon in any case," Chip Stack said guilelessly. "It might wind the whole matter up more satisfactorily for everyone if you just let her keep her new coat and made restitution to the insurance company in cash."

"Upon what grounds?" Harrison snapped.

"That the lost coat has been accounted for after a mistake and so you are returning the insurance settlement. I can promise you that the company will have no further interest in the matter."

Harrison stalked to a desk, ripped out a checkbook and writing quickly finally thrust a check for the full amount at Chip Stack.

Chip bowed with admiration. "A most generous surprise for your wife, Mr. Harrison. This coat is rather worn and she wanted to give it to Valerie Snowden anyway."

He left the house humming softly. There was only one remaining chore now, to clear the check girl officially and get Rosa the coat that had been left in the switch.

Chip Stack felt quite chivalrous. Everybody was getting what they wanted, including himself. A very just reward for minx—and finks.

GALLOWS HIGHWAY

*The slain woman was the conspicuous type.
But no one had seen her board a Miami-
bound plane and get off at the Miami
airport. So Shayne had to play a hunch.*

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**



MICHAEL SHAYNE pushed his panama hat back on his furrowed forehead and squinted at Timothy Rourke of the *Miami Daily News*.

"You wanted to see me, Tim?"

A pleased look flooded Rourke's keen face and a smile pulled at his lips. "Mike. Grab a chair and sit down. You're sure a hard man to find."

Shayne's rangy body folded easily into the chair across from Tim Rourke's desk. He crossed his legs and pyramided his fingers.

"Come on, Tim. Something's on your mind.

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE THRILLER



Lucy called me at the apartment, so I decided to stop here before going to the office. What's up?"

Rourke sighed. "This won't take long, Mike. I wanted to talk to you in person instead of over the phone."

"Talk about what?"

"Would you stand for an interview and a big feature spread in the magazine supplement in the Sunday edition of the *News*?"

Michael Shayne's bushy eyebrows rose. "Say that again."

Rourke spread his hands almost apologetically.

"I know how you feel about publicity, Mike. You don't need it. You don't want it. You're a private detective and clients come to you without advertising. But hear me out. Our publisher feels that Miami owes you a debt of gratitude. You're a straightshooter and you work a good store. He thinks you'd make swell copy for the paper."

"Hogwash," Shayne growled.

"Okay," Rourke sighed again. "I told him you wouldn't go for the notion. No harm in trying though, was there? But for the life of me, I can't understand why you're so damn modest!"

"Timothy," Shayne said, and lit a cigarette, poking it between his thin lips. "I appreciate the bouquets but maybe I can spell it out for you. I'm not in the sort of business where a layout in your paper is going to do me much good. First of all, clients have to have confidence in a detec-

tive to bring him their troubles. What would it look like if they find me splashed over the papers with pictures and a lot of gook about my job? No thanks."

"I wish you'd tell that to the boss," Rourke sighed unhappily.

Shayne chuckled. "You tell him. Did you mention this plot to Lucy?"

The newspaperman nodded. "Your secretary practically laughed in my face. Even over a telephone, I got the point."

"Lucy understands me. Which is probably why she's been able to put up with me all these years." The detective lumbered to his feet, stretching his long arms. "Sorry, Tim. Better luck next time."

The black telephone on Rourke's desk whirled. Shayne paused to give Tim time to answer it before he left. Rourke listened for a second, then blinked. "It's for you, Mike. Lucy's on the warpath."

Puzzled, Shayne swept the receiver to his ear. It wasn't like Lucy to start off a phone conversation in high gear.

"What gives, angel?" he asked.

"Michael! Will Gentry called. He's either terribly angry or terribly upset. Or playing games this early in the morning. I couldn't be sure. I only know he wants to see you as soon as you can make it. He didn't call from Headquarters. He's at the airport. Southeast Lines. An independent air transport—"

"Got it, Lucy. Did he give you an idea what it was all about?"

Lucy Hamilton had halted to catch her breath. "No, he didn't, Michael. He just said he'd like to have you hurry on over there."

Shayne's eyebrows unlocked. He had a hunch that something important had happened at Miami Airport, and in all probability it concerned one Michael Shayne.

"All right, angel," he said. "See you later."

When he hung up, he eyed Timothy Rourke critically. "Anything special happening at the airport today, Tim?" he asked.

Rourke chuckled. "Newswise, unless Kennedy was coming in on the twelve o'clock plane, we wouldn't consider an arrival or departure extraordinary in any way. I imagine that's what you mean by 'special.' Why, what's up?"

"When I find out, I'll let you know. Take it easy, Tim, and thanks."

II

MICHAEL SHAYNE drove as fast as the law allowed on the highways that led to the airfield.

Miami Airport shone like a jewel in the sunlight.

As Shayne wheeled his car into the wide terminal parking lot, there was no sign of anything amiss. A big Convair passenger plane was just coming in over the northeastern runway. Everything seemed as usual until Shayne spied Chief Will Gentry heatedly conversing with two of



his plainclothesmen at the entrance to the high central building.

"Will, what's up?" he asked, taking care to keep his concern under wraps. "Lucy said you were in a hurry—"

"No time for explanations, Mike. Come on. You know the boys?"

Shayne acknowledged the greetings of Gentry's men. Shrugging, he tagged along as the burly Chief led the way into the heart of the terminal, past small knots of waiting passengers and civilians preparing for flight arrivals and departures. There was a general hum and roar of life intermittently pierced by the P. A. system's announcements.

"Flight Nineteen coming in on runway . . ."

Gentry steered Shayne steadily across the tiled lobby, past a network of desks and doors and booths. Finally, he halted before a door lettered SOUTHEAST AIRLINES in neat gilt letters. The smaller letters below said *James Jenkins, Manager*.

"In here," the Chief growled, poking a cigar into his mouth. "Hold onto your panama hat. It isn't pretty."

Shayne had never known Will Gentry to exaggerate. He ran true to form now.

The office was a big modern affair with a picture window exposing the entire landing field. The Control Tower was visible to the left but Shayne didn't waste time on the view. A nervous-looking executive-type man with balding hair jumped up from behind the desk but almost instantly the policeman on duty in a big easy chair waved him down again.

There was the body of a woman stretched out at full length between the desk and the window. She wore a brown sheath dress and a choker of pearls, and was lying face down on the floor with a knife protruding from between her shoulder blades. Her right arm was outflung and the crumpled dress was stained with blood.

The nervous, balding executive groaned aloud as Shayne knelt and gently raised the girl's head.

Shayne tightened his lips and

stood up, his expression grim. The girl's pale beautiful face had been wasted on death, but that kind of waste was not unfamiliar to Shayne.

"Ever see her before, Mike?" Gentry asked.

Michael Shayne shook his head. "What's this all about, Will?"

Gentry growled. "Jenkins here phoned us to hurry over. When we got here, we found her just as you see her. He doesn't know her either. He was in the terminal checking passenger lists. If he had come back only a minute or two sooner —" Gentry shrugged, and let the sentence hang.

Shayne pulled a crumpled package of cigarettes from his jacket — took one out and lit it before he turned to Gentry and said, "What's that got to do with me?"

Gentry sighed and looked at the nervous man. "Go ahead, Jenkins. You tell him."

James Jenkins had difficulty in keeping his voice steady. "It's as I said. I was out there making some check-ups. When I came back she was still alive. She was staggering toward the window, but she turned to face me when I came in. Before I could reach her, she mumbled something I could hear. She said, 'Call Mike Shayne,' and that's the last thing she said before she spun around and crashed to the floor. It was awful—" He broke down, shuddering, and looked away from the corpse again.

Gentry looked at Shayne. "Well?

You heard him, Mike. Now — do you know her?"

"No," Michael Shayne bit it out. "And if I did, you know damned well I'd tell you, Will."

"Easy does it, Mike," Gentry said. "Just wanted you to hear the man's story. In exactly the way he told it. We checked with all the Southeast personnel. Nobody remembers seeing her or talking to her. It's like she walked into this office out of nowhere." He turned to the policeman in the chair. "Let's have those personal effects again, Tom."

The cop nodded, walked over to Jenkins' desk and pulled out the center drawer. He withdrew a handkerchief sling and spread it out on the desk. Gentry motioned Shayne to have a look.

There was the usual pile of a woman's accessories. Comb, emery board, lipstick, change purse and a wallet. The wallet held a flock of cards and photos. The cards identified the corpse as Wilma Henderson, airline stewardess for a non-schedule outfit called *Zephyr Transport*. The photos were remarkable because there were quite a few of them and in each one she had been snapped with a man. Intimate cheek-to-cheek style and very cozy.

Shayne grinned sourly. "I see seven possible suspects from here."

"So do I!" Gentry admitted. "Mike, the *Zephyr* outfit went bankrupt two months ago, according to the check we made a little while

back and right now we have to find out what Miss Henderson was doing here."

Shayne looked at James Jenkins. "How about it, Mr. Jenkins? Was she applying for a job?"

Jenkins stiffened at the implication. "Certainly not. As I told Gentry, I've never set eyes on her before. In fact—"

Before Jenkins could continue the phone on his desk rang. At a nod from the police chief he picked up the receiver and listened for a moment.

"It's for you, Mr. Shayne," he said, passing the phone to the redhead.

Shayne was surprised when he heard Lucy's voice, but his expression did not change.

"Yes, angel?"

"Michael," Lucy said in a low voice. "This is a little odd, so I thought I'd better phone you. A telegram got here a few minutes ago. Shall I read it to you?"

"All right, angel. Shoot!"

"Arriving Miami Airport Flight Seventeen. Two o'clock today. Please meet me. Matter life or death. It's signed, Wilma Henderson."

"Thanks, angel. I'll call you later." Michael Shayne hung up.

"Well?" Gentry growled.

Shayne's eyebrows were knit in a scowl. "A telegram from Wilma Henderson arrived at my office a little while ago. She had wired on from New York for me to meet her.

She knew me, all right. And, as I've taken pains to point out, I *didn't* know her. But what's even crazier is this—she arrived here on Flight Seventeen. Now how is it possible, Mr. Jenkins, that none of your people recognized her? You could hardly claim she was nondescript, with a face and a figure like that."

"I don't understand," James Jenkins said, paling slightly. "You say she did come here by plane? There was nobody by her name on the manifest."

"Unless she used an alias," Gentry said.

"Sure," Shayne said drily. "That would also explain the knife in her back. She was obviously right when she said it was a matter of life or death."

"Dammit," Gentry cried. "It makes no sense at all. A dame flies in using a phony name. Sends a telegram to a private detective, instead of phoning him to make sure he's available. And then winds up in this office with a knife in her back. Why?"

"It will continue to make no sense," Michael Shayne conceded, "until we find out a lot more about Wilma Henderson. Particularly—why her telegram didn't get here on time for me to meet her."

III

"HOW AWFUL," Lucy Hamilton said when Shayne got back to Flagler Street and gave her the details.

Gentry had remained at the airport, lining up all the avenues of detection which would facilitate a quick solution to the case.

Shayne said, "They say a picture is worth a thousand words and photos don't lie. In this case they were all intimate-type photos of Wilma and men friends. And from them she seemed like a woman who plays fast and loose, angel. However, we can't be sure, of course. Every killer should have the book thrown at him. But that doesn't mean that the victim is always free of guilt."

"Don't be cruel, Michael. The woman's dead."

"She had the grand total of seven photos in her wallet. Seven chummy snapshots of different men. Jealous husband's see red when a woman betrays them and generally act like something out of ancient Italy."

Lucy's eyes widened. "Then you have some hunch about her?"

Shayne grinned. "Not so fast. All we do know is that an airline stewardess named Wilma Henderson sent me a telegram hinting of danger and we find her at the airport with a knife in her back. That's not much to go on. There are so many questions that need answering. Why was she in trouble? Why did she get in touch with me? How come nobody on the flight remembered such an attractive woman? Last but not least—who killed her?"

"How about that Jenkins man you mentioned?"



"A scared rabbit. He's the type who might be capable of knifing a girl that way if pushed far enough. But I can't see him phoning the cops to find a corpse in his office. It's inconsistent."

"That's true," Lucy agreed. "But it would also be a very clever move to make you jump to a false conclusion about him."

"Angel," Michael Shayne laughed. "You've been around me too long."

The phone rang. Lucy took the call and then handed the receiver to Shayne. It was Tim Rourke calling. The reporter sounded slightly peeved.

"My pal. You could have called me on that homicide, Mike."

Shayne snorted. "I'm no cub reporter, Tim. Besides, it's Gentry's case. I can't call the shots for him."

Rourke's tone softened. "I guess not. But you must have some side-lights for me, Mike. You were there. What does Gentry think? He doesn't usually keep you completely in the dark."

"All I can tell you is she was beautiful and very dead. I gave Gentry a promise—and there are complications I can't go into right now. Sorry, Tim. But I *could* use your help."

"Such as?"

"Her name was Wilma Henderson and she worked as a stewardess for an outfit called Zephyr Transport. The business folded. She was a looker and her personal effects indicated she must have been a heart-breaker type from way back."

"You mean—lots of boyfriends?"

"And then some. If you can track anything down about her, I'll give you an exclusive when this case breaks wide open. Fair enough, Tim?"

Rourke didn't have to think it over. "It's a deal, Mike. I'll ring you back when I've got something for you."

Shayne hung up with a satisfied air. Lucy Hamilton frowned. "What was that all about?"

"Newspapermen," Shayne grinned, "have their purposes,

angel. Meanwhile, how about checking through all our files to see if we ever had a client named Henderson who might have been related to the corpse. Or any reference at all to airlines or stewardesses. I still would like to know why she wanted to contact me. It had to be of life-or-death importance, if Jenkins wasn't lying about what she said just before she died."

Lucy hurried off to do the assigned task. Shayne went back to his desk and spent some time checking the personal mail, letters and notices of the last few days. He found nothing to indicate the origins of one Wilma Henderson. It was disturbing.

He was even more disturbed when Will Gentry rang the office a half hour later. Gentry sounded not only perturbed, but downright irritated.

"No luggage, Mike," he barked.

"Come again?"

"The corpse checked no luggage. Assuming she was on the plane at all—"

"Hold on, Will," Shayne cut in. "Non-stop New York to Miami doesn't have to mean luggage. Hell, a suitcase in one hand under the required size she could have kept on board in her seat, right?"

"A small suitcase might be overlooked and not weighed in," Gentry agreed. "But for a woman to travel that light on a New York to Miami flight would be downright odd. You know how women are about chang-

ing clothes. Mike, I have a feeling she wasn't on the flight, but was in Miami all the time."

"And the telegram?"

Gentry's laugh was sarcastic. "Checked that out too. The wire was *phoned* in, with the party doing the sending dropping the exact amount in the coin box. That means anybody could have sent that telegram. A friend of the corpse's or even her murderer. The call was from a New York phone booth near the east side airline terminal."

Shayne reflected for only an instant. "That's a helluva long way around to cover one's tracks, Will. It doesn't make sense, if what you say is true."

"Wilma Henderson didn't make sense either. It turns out she's been married four times, no children, and has been a stewardess for three different airlines. A good, reliable dame, obviously."

"You have those husbands' names handy?"

"Sure, wait a minute... here they are—Peter Hawks in fifty-one, Carl Osgood in fifty-three and then a Paul Fern in fifty-seven. And she just dumped a Ben Farlow as recently as January of this year in Mexico."

"She got around," Shayne said. "Thanks for the dope, Will. I'll call you if I think of anything."

"You do that, Mike." Gentry hung up.

Michael Shayne strode briskly into the outer office and interrupted

Lucy who was foraging through a file drawer. She looked up, surprised at his urgency.

"Hold everything, angel. Dig out the file on Paul Fern. The name rings a bell. That insurance salesman who came to Miami in fifty-seven to open an office. He hired me to run down a phony policy claim for him in co-ordination with his company."

"Yes!" Lucy Hamilton nodded emphatically. "Fern! I remember that name too. But how did you think of it?"

"Elephants and private detectives," said Michael Shayne, "never forget their clients. Especially if the elephant's name is Will Gentry."

It was all there in the record. Paul Fern's folder contained the name of a wife listed as Wilma Henderson. She had obviously gone back to using her maiden name.

"Now," Shayne grunted grimly, "why would she remember my name after all these years?"

"She obviously remembered you'd done a job for her ex-husband," Lucy said. "It was simple as that, Michael."

"The girl's dead, angel, and Will Gentry thinks she was here all the time and didn't send the telegram."

"What do you think, Michael?"

"I think that Will is very wrong. And I'm going to do something about proving that right now." He reached for the Panama on the hat tree by Lucy Hamilton's desk.

"Where are you going now?"

Shayne said, "You can reach me at Miami Airport. I'll be with James Jenkins. That rabbit is hiding something, and I don't think it's carrots."

IV

JAMES JENKINS was visibly upset with the presence of Michael Shayne in his office. The furore of the day and the continued police activity in and around the terminal had unnerved him. His balding head shone sweaty, and the remaining hair looked frayed and unkempt.

"I don't understand the purpose of your return visit, Mr. Shayne. Surely, Chief Gentry has covered all there is to cover."

"No, he hasn't." Shayne lit a cigarette. "The facts are still inconclusive," he went on. "There is no earthly reason for Wilma Henderson to send me a telegram to meet her here unless she expected danger at this precise location."

Jenkins was confused. He said as much. Shayne smiled.

"Mr. Jenkins. An ex-airline stewardess, out of work, sends me a telegram to meet her plane. When I get here nobody claims to have seen her on the flight. Yet Wilma Henderson is very dead on the floor in your office. The telegram came too late and only the craziest coincidence brought me here anyway.

"Now it is Gentry's theory that the telegram was a fake, and that Wilma Henderson was in Miami all

the time. He is sure that some anonymous killer set all this machinery in action to deceive the police. Yet you yourself tell me she blurted out my name before dying.

"It just isn't likely that any murderer to have gone to the bother of sending a telegram and bringing me into the picture unless it was on the level. Don't you see what I mean? Gentry is certainly not going to be fooled by a red herring called Michael Shayne. He knows me so well that such a clumsy attempt to mislead the police would have no point."

Jenkins shook his head. "What are you driving at?"

"Simply this. I don't understand all this nonsense about Wilma Henderson and Flight Seventeen. If we prove that she *has to be* on the plane because there is no logical reason that she *shouldn't be*, then it follows that everybody is either stone blind or she changed her clothes and appearance during the flight. We know she couldn't have done that, because no luggage except a small handbag was found near her body. So what does all that suggest to you?"

The manager bristled. "Are you calling me a liar, Shayne?"

"What else?" the detective offered amiably. "You're the only man at this airport who could fake that girl's presence one way or another. Only you could camouflage her being on Flight Seventeen. You could change the records. You could have

bribed the stewardess and pilot on that flight to say they didn't remember her. You could have made up a story to them to cover the lie. You're the boss. Why should they care? What I want to know is—why did you do it?"

Jenkins broke then. His head sank and he stared at his hands, knotting them into fists. "Damn her. Dead or alive she's caused me trouble. I'm a married man, Shayne, and if this ever gets out—"

"Just keep talking," Shayne said. He was staring very steadily at Jenkins now, giving the man no time to change his mind and become evasive again.

Jenkins sighed. "Wilma was a devil. She came to ask for a job. We had a thing—a few years ago. Then she moved on to New York. I thought I'd seen the last of her until today when she came in on Flight Seventeen."

"Go on."

"Well, she came in here, and told me that her life was in danger. She said she was meeting you, but that you hadn't shown up. She wanted a job, and some money. I'd never seen her so upset. I went out to the terminal to see if I could draw one hundred in petty cash from the cashier. When I returned she was on the floor with the knife protruding from her back."

Jenkins rose from behind the desk, his face pleading. "You have to believe me, Mr. Shayne. I left her for no more than five minutes!"

Shayne studied him. "Okay. I'll buy that for now. But why spook up her being on the plane at all?"

Jenkins shook his head, gulping. "I don't know. I was frightened, confused. I didn't want to be drawn into it when so much was at stake. And then, I lost my head completely. I falsified the flight record. I talked to the pilot and stewardess. Convinced them that the company would want me to handle it in my own way. Gentry took my word for it. He didn't question them further. Becoming deeply involved in a murder case in connection with Wilma could have ruined my marriage, even if I could have proved my innocence. My wife is a fine woman—" His voice broke.

"Did Wilma give you any idea who had threatened her life?"

"No," Jenkins said. "She was always getting into trouble. Drinking, raising hell. She was fired here at Miami because she tried to involve an influential passenger in a shake-down of some kind."

"Who might that be?"

"His name is Jonathan Wilson, but he couldn't have killed her. He died last year."

"All right, that rules him out. What else can you tell me about Wilma in relation to this airport? Do any of her old boyfriends still work here?"

"I really don't know," said Jenkins. "But with a woman like Wilma it could have been any one of twenty or thirty men."



"Somebody stuck a knife in her back," Shayne said quietly. "For revenge—or because she was hiring a private detective to guard her. She may have dug up something so damaging that the killer had to silence her."

"God," Jenkins groaned. "Why did she have to come here and start all this trouble?"

Michael Shayne got to his feet.

"When I find that out, Mr. Jenkins, you'll be one of the first to know."

V

"JENKINS IS YOUR murderer, Will," Michael Shayne told an amazed Gentry at five o'clock that afternoon. "You've got a few lies to get him on. Falsifying the flight record, and asking those employees to lie like that. But unless he cracks under a grilling, you've got no con-

crete evidence to hold him on. You'll have to link him directly to Wilma Henderson."

"Damn it, Mike." Gentry's florid face was determined. "I'll crack him."

"You may not, Will. He came through my questions as slick as they make them. If he was going to crack, he would have done so right then and there. He only *looks* like a rabbit."

Gentry scowled. "How do you read what happened?"

Shayne shrugged. It's only a guess but it's good enough. Wilma was coming to Miami by plane. She was having a showdown with Jenkins and wanted me standing by. She had something on him, and you can be sure the story he told me was a complete lie. She pushed him too far, and he killed her. The question is: what did she know that compelled him to go that far?"

Gentry pounded the desk. "Why would Jenkins tell us she blurted your name while he was dying? How could he know she hadn't left some documents with you that would have put his head in the noose?"

"He couldn't afford to go too far in his cover up. He had to bring me into it to keep himself in the clear because Wilma must have told him she had wired me. What we have to find out is what Wilma Henderson had on him."

"How are we going to do that?" Gentry asked.

"Murderers and phonies always fall for a bluff sooner or later. Mostly because they've got something to hide. You could check on the Southeast setup and maybe come up with something. They may be sending contraband of some kind on the flights. Wilma may have known about it. Check on that possibility. Meanwhile, if you'll pay close attention, I think I know how we can pull James Jenkins' tail good and proper."

"Okay," Gentry said. "Counterfeit money, dope or diamonds are a long shot. Mike, what's your bluff?"

"Call him on the phone now. Invite him down to your office tomorrow. Tell him you've found a safe deposit box that was leased in her name and you want him to come along. So he can be on hand for the grand opening. Tell him the key was mailed to me from New York and was in this afternoon's mail."

"I get the picture," Will Gentry smiled and reached for the telephone on his desk.

VI

LUCY HAMILTON stood in the doorway. "Mr. James Jenkins to see you," she said crisply. Jenkins came into Shayne's office, mopping his brow and looking very nervous. Shayne didn't miss the wild gleam of the manager's eyes.

"Sit down," Shayne said, and gestured toward a chair. "You've had a very busy day, Mr. Jenkins."

"Why didn't you tell me about the key?" Jenkins blurted when the door had closed. "Gentry called and told me—"

Shayne smiled. "I had no idea about it until I found the letter on my desk when I got back here. Just why does it disturb you so much?"

Jenkins' smile was ghastly. "Let's not haggle, Shayne. I can't afford to guess about the contents of any safety deposit box that Wilma Henderson had anything to do with. I'll give you ten thousand dollars for that key right now."

"What about Gentry?" Shayne asked innocently.

Jenkins nodded feverishly. "I'm paying ten thousand for just a look-see. Anything relating to me I want from that box. I'll leave everything else, I promise. I'll give you the key back before you and Gentry go down in the morning to check on it. The Chief will never have to know."

Shayne seemed to consider the offer. "That's a lot of money just for a look in the box. Are you sure it's worth that much to you?"

Jenkins' eyes were steely. "It's a small price to pay to avoid having my name linked with Wilma Henderson's."

"You must love your wife very much."

"Yes, very," the manager snapped. "Do you accept the offer?"

"No."

Jenkins was surprised. "What?"

Michael Shayne's rugged face was stone cold.

"You've been lying to me. There was no love affair between you and Wilma. And no adult woman would give a hoot about a woman in your life from the past, if it had just been a run-of-the-mill affair. Your wife doesn't mean a thing to you. But money does. Like this phony blind you have with Southeast Airlines. It won't work, Jenkins, because I know what you've been shipping on those flights."

Jenkins paled. "So she *did* tell you! Shayne, don't fly off the handle. You play your cards right and there's a lot of money in this operation for you. But first I have to see that deposit box before Gentry does or the whole deal will be blown sky-high."

There was no mistaking the physical condition of James Jenkins. The glazed aspect of his eyes told Shayne all there was to know. Now, it was worth gambling.

"You killed Wilma, didn't you?"

James Jenkins sucked in his breath. "That tramp. It was a sweet set-up. A pipe-line to the States by way of Red China and Cuba. A traffic in narcotics by the bushel. All the way from Europe and Asia. And that little tramp had the nerve to try and cut in. I—lost my head. But I'm thinking clear now, Shayne!"

"You are?"

"Believe me. Take my ten grand. Help me. And I'll cut you in on the sweetest cake in the world. What could that cheap gold digger mean to you?"

Shayne walked to the window that looked out on Flagler Street.

"She was my client even if I hadn't already agreed to work for her. She expected me to help her. And nobody hates narcotics more than I do in all the world. You'll hang, Jenkins—mostly because of this."

Shayne held up the spool of recording tape which had just snapped to a close on the automatic recorder concealed behind one of the window drapes.

Jenkins uttered a weird sound in his throat. He leapt from his chair, but before he could reach the detective, Shayne took a quick step forward and straight-armed him back into the chair. He sat there gasping for breath, his face congested with rage.

Shayne walked to the office door, opened it, and called out.

"Okay, Lucy. Have Gentry come in. James Jenkins is ready to talk to him now. And if he doesn't want to, I have it all on tape anyway."

TWENTY MINUTES later, a satisfied Will Gentry had led James Jenkins away in handcuffs. The airport manager looked more like a rabbit than ever alongside the stocky, tough Chief of Miami Police.

Shayne dropped wearily into his desk chair and closed his eyes.

When he opened them, Lucy Hamilton was quietly changing the water in the flower vase on the win-

dowsill. She made no mention of the recording machine still sitting there.

She looked sweet, fresh and lovely. Shayne smiled up at her warmly.

"You know, angel. The recorder routine speeded things up. Jenkins didn't have a prayer really."

"How do you mean, Michael?"

Shayne looked grim. "When Gentry convinced the plane personnel that this was a murder, how long do you think they would have kept on lying for Jenkins! No, he was doomed from the word go."

Lucy smiled. "If you say so, Michael."

"I do say. Thank God, we're out of it. The case is closed for me. Now Gentry has to work with the Feds to squash this narcotics business. Poor Jenkins!" Michael Shayne sighed and reached for a bottle of cognac. "Just a rabbit. A poor little bastard rabbit."

The phone rang. Lucy picked it up, listened, smiled and handed the receiver to Shayne. "It's Tim Rourke."

Shayne took the phone. "Yes, Timothy?"

"Well, Shayne!" Tim Rourke was crowing. "Now what do you say about that Sunday feature story? You're Page One again! Sensational case. Narcotics. You can't help making headlines. Now if you ask me—"

"But nobody did ask you, Tim," Michael Shayne said and hung up.

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Mar. 63

The Midgets and the Monster

by THOMAS CALVERT McCLARY

*Blind panic coursed through little Tito like sheets
of ice cold rain. So here was the phantom killer that
he'd been so brave about when he'd organized the
Midget Pythons! Now he didn't feel brave at all!*

LITTLE PEPE VALDEZ vanished from his mother's side in the laundrymat at four-thirty of a bright spring afternoon. The streets were thronged with the women of the neighborhood, all of whom knew Pepe as a particularly mischievous little brat, and so, usually kept an eye on him.

Vanished was the only possible description. By eight that night his frantic mother had failed to raise a trace of him and called on the police.

The police failed equally to raise

a rumor of him, but uncovered enough sex deviates and criminal sadists for the commissioner to order a dragnet, in this case numbering three hundred detectives. The mere presence of such a massive array of law and order drove the tenement neighborhood underground and silent as a grave.

So deep was the instinct to avoid police interrogation that one of the first to hide was Tito Arroyito, aged not quite seven. By that age, he had already learned to guard his secrets, and his secret hiding place was not

even known by his brothers. It was the thirty-inch space between the rafters under the floors, reached by devious squeezing through a loose wall board in the toilet.

Tito hid there most of two days, supplied with news and food and solace by his little sister, Angela. That his absence went unnoted and his hideout remained unknown was example of the difficulty of police shakedowns in the area.

Tito hid with all of the imaginative fear and anxiety of six-year-old guilt. For only last week he had sworn a terrible oath at the mischievous Pepe Valdez, swearing to catch him and throw him to the monster for dropping a bag of water on Angela. And now, he knew, the monster had caught Pepe and done away with him, even though Tito's monster was a myth.

Oddly, however, *Monster* was what the tabloids branded a hypothetical phantom killer, whose actual existence remained as vague as Tito's monster for thirty-six hours, while the detectives investigated every ashcan, furnace and cellar in the neighborhood.

At that point, Pepe Valdez's bloodied clothes and naked body were found strewn over two roofs directly above the laundrymat.

The boy had been repeatedly stabbed to death in a sadistic orgy that had apparently reached across both rooftops, and that must have occupied an hour. Death was established as taking place between the



time he disappeared and six p.m. How it was possible in that teeming neighborhood to lure the boy up five flights of stairs and to attack him on a rooftop without causing notice remained an unexplained mystery. There was no clue except an unexplained quarter found in the dead boy's pants pocket.

Angela brought the first news of the discovery, which was both terrible and a relief to Tito. It was terrible to contemplate because the rooftops were the forbidden, but private jungle of the juvenile gangs. The small fry trailed the older boys

at a distance, like jackals, picking up cast-off bits of loot, and the worldly knowledge that comes so early to the tenements.

"Think of it, Angela, right on one of our own playrooms!" Tito whispered with the terror of his thoughts. "The monster might even have caught you or me!"

"But you would have saved me, Tito," she quavered between fright and loyalty.

"Si," he nodded, his manhood touched. "I will always save you, Little Angela. Who else would bother? But we might need our big cousins in the Purple Pythons to help us."

Her little fingers dug into his. "But Tito—the policia think maybe some of the Pythons did it for kicks, like they make the rumble."

"No!" he breathed with shock. "Our own street gang? Why, some day I will belong to them myself. It could not be."

"The big people are whispering that," she insisted.

He pondered that with six year old gravity. "I do not think so. Most of them were out of the neighborhood when this happened to Pepe. Still, we cannot take chances. We must make a secret plan to protect us against the monster, whoever he may be."

"But we are so little," she said.

"Still, we are many. Do you remember when Fatso, the school cop, tried to walk through our play street last year?"

Angela giggled, "He was so mad and messy when the other cops came to save him! And he never learned who rolled the garbage can under him, did he?"

Tito chuckled with the memory. The big truant cop had looked so foolish, floundering on the sidewalk with waves of small fry rolling over him like surf over a pebble. The regular cops had laughed so hard they couldn't even holler to scare the kids off. They called it the Midget Riot.

Tito squeezed her hand with manly assurance. "Enough of us could get down any man—even the monster. But we must know what we would do and have a secret way to call each other. As soon as the block is safe of cops, I will call a secret meeting. We will make our own gang and call it the Midget Pythons."

Angela gurgled with delight. "And find the monster and treat him like we did Fatso?"

"Worse," Tito said grimly. "We will do to him what he did to Pepe."

The small fry gang was a tremendous success with the excitement of a real bloody monster to inspire it. Even the five year olds learned the secret signs and secret whistle. And best of all was the secret plan, which called for a temporary monster to practice on. Temporary monsters were selected from among those kids in disfavor, and mothers noted that the treatment improved their manners notably,

although it was sign of the small fry secretiveness that not even the Youth cops fully fathomed the reason.

It was a good two months before the excitement of Pepe's murder died. By then, the small fry had learned to bound into a monster's legs and pile on like well-trained football players. Sometimes in the fall, after school began, they still played the game. But by then, even neighborhood mothers had forgotten the menace and horror of the monster, and the game had lost its kick.

Even Tito Arroyito forgot his sister's safety and let her out of sight if he got involved in the game of kicking beer cans noisily down the street.

On the anniversary of Pepe's unsolved murder, only one TV commentator broke the city's cynical apathy to query the police commissioner on the status of the hideous and heinous deed of horror. The commissioner made the usual evasive replies. Clues and suspects were still being traced. It was possible that the culprit had been the sex maniac shot dead during the course of an attempted murder in Central Park last summer.

In any case, there had been no similar attacks bearing the same bold and daring earmarks. The police were still alerted to protection of the city's pre-adolescents particularly, etc, etc.

Tito was now a year older. He

had put on weight and was acquiring the almost classical good looks that mark so many of the young Latins. He was wiry for his age, already good at stickball, and boyishly proud of his agility and strength gained by swinging up fire-escape ladders and jumping the rooftops.

This particular day he left his sister at the home corner, darting ahead to intercept an off-played stickball. He tossed it back into the game, grinning a taunting jeer at the curse he got, and headed on home, forgetful of his sister. He was abreast of one of the tenements when Baggy pants Anton hailed him.

Anton was a tenement superintendent of uncertain temper, depending on his drinks. It was standard fun for the small fry to throw beer cans and bottles down into his cellerway just to roil him into his violent languaged outbursts. However, he possessed the virtue of not calling the cops when the kids were playing upon his roof or came through his cellarway from the yards behind. Sometimes he would even sneak one of the older boys a drink, which created a state of belligerent truce.

Tito stopped at a discreet distance beyond a possible kick in the pants and waited to see what Anton wanted. Anton had been drinking and looked moody, but he growled good naturedly, for him, "You grow fast now, Tito. Put on a little fat."

Tito scowled, "That's muscle and you better know it!"

Anton grinned. Actually, it was not a grin, but a peeling back of his heavy lips over his yellow fangs. "Muscle, eh? Maybe enough to do a little work? Maybe I pay you two dollars if you do it good and fast."

Tito regarded him suspiciously. "It must be a damned dirty job if you're going to pay for it."

"It is nothing," Anton said and rubbed a horny hand over his back. "I have got the sore muscles today and cannot bend and the roof needs cleaning before the inspector comes. Two dollars is cheaper than a fine. The Purple Pythons have been up there drinking and playing cards."

It sounded logical, Tito considered. These inspectors gave the supers hell about roofs and fire-escapes and garbage. Any fine they got would be five dollars and if an inspector was feeling nasty, he made it ten or fifteen.

Tito glanced down the street at the kids drifting home from school. No neighborhood boy would be caught dead doing common work like that, but it would be an hour or better before somebody figured out some hellraising on the roofs. Usually, it started with a water fight down on the street. The older boys used the roofs later, usually at night, for drinking or necking or sightseeing or lining up some apartment for a raid.

And two dollars was two dollars. A job like that was like sneakthiev-

ing—it was all right if you didn't get caught.

"Dollar on the line?" he bargained.

Anton grunted assent and fished a dirty dollar bill from his pocket. "Go through the cellar and pick up two five gallon paint cans by the furnace," he said.

Tito swung down the cellar steps and into the dim, dusty smelling vaults toward the weak glow of a single, fifteen-watt bulb. The paint buckets were not beside the furnace and he moved through into the paint shop, knowing the layout intimately, just as he knew every cellar and every roof on the block from prowling.

He located the buckets under a bench. He had to empty them of junk, which took a few minutes, and when he turned, Anton was standing in the doorway watching him. He'd come down the inside stairs, as silent as a cat.

It gave Tito a shock, but he wasn't going to show it. He said with neighborhood insolence, "You don't even know where your own buckets are!"

Anton wiped his nose with a hairy knuckle. "Maybe them aren't the right ones."

Anton was looking all around the cellar, even in the hall back of him, but he wasn't looking down at the floor level, he was looking high up, as if searching for anybody who might be snooping. There was something vague and moody about

him that Tito didn't like. He wondered if this was a ruse to get him cornered where Anton could pinch the ear off him for chalking up his precious walls, but then, Anton wouldn't have chanced a dollar.

The sound of kid voices came from the front cellarway. They weren't just chasing a ball, but standing out there by the railing bouncing it.

Anton frowned, and in that heavily shadowed light, his face had the look of a snarl. Tito said uneasily, "What's the matter with these buckets?"

Anton growled, "All right, all right. Take 'em up through the back stairs. Maybe that inspector's already on the block."

He didn't have to urge that twice. Tito wasn't anxious to have the gang see him carrying buckets, either. He ducked past Anton and darted up the inside stairs and went straight on up to the roof. The roof door was double hooked and that surprised him because Anton must have been up there to inspect the rubbish himself, and if he was coming back, he would ordinarily leave the door open in this weather to air out the house.

Tito knocked the hooks loose with the edge of a bucket and was surprised to hear Anton mounting the stairs behind him. He'd come up the four flights awful fast for a muscular man with a sore back, although Tito recalled him jumping to catch a ball one day with aston-

ishing agility for such a large heavy-set man.

Tito moved out onto the roof and set the buckets down, looking for the debris that invariably gathered. It was clear that the Purple Pythons had been up here. There were beer cans and coke bottles and some torn playing cards, and a dirty ripped bra. But it was awfully little clutter to pay two bucks to get cleaned up, and old Baggy pants didn't hand out two bucks for nothing.

"What's this crazy dope up to?" Tito wondered with the quick suspicion of the tenements.

Anton had come through the roof door and was closing it with the outside hasp. Tito watched him with his jungle senses sharpening. That door sprang back hard against the hasp and it was a tough one to trip loose in a hurry. Tito knew all about it because they had used it to trap Jocko Dursten the day they decided to give him a shampoo with roof tar.

"What's that for?" Tito demanded.

"If the inspector comes up too soon, it gives time to clean up before I let him out," Anton grunted.

He was looking around, but it didn't look as if he were concerned with the rubbish. It looked like he was looking for anybody who might be on other roofs.

Tito moved his paint cans over by the dividing wall where he had a little room between himself and Anton. There were a few more

cards and bottles scattered on the next roof, and an old typewriter one of the gang must have stolen before he realized it was worthless.

That roof was one of Anton's buildings too. The door locked with a hook, same as the others, but Tito noticed that the spring leaf the kids kept there to slip through and open the hook from this side was missing. The third roof over was the corner building but he could not see the roof itself because that building was a half story lower. On the side street, that building adjoined one a full story taller. He could see that wall clear enough, and somebody had frayed loose the line the kids kept wrapped to the chimney to climb up there.

Chill suspicion washed through the boy and the hairs on his neck began to rise. He didn't *sabe* this, but it looked like somebody had been damned careful to cut off escape. He could probably bolt past Anton with a boy's nimbleness and make it to his own building on the other sidestreet, or drop down some fire escape, but he'd look like a damn fool when nothing had happened.

And if nothing was going to happen, he wanted to make that other dollar. Still, he'd feel a lot better if some of the Midgets had been playing nearby, even if they jeered at seeing him work.

He looked back at Anton. Anton had come after him half way across the roof and stopped there staring at him, a pint bottle in his hand. His

mouth was still wet from a drink he'd taken, and his face was flushed and he was breathing hard and fast. He took another long drink from the bottle, blew hard and poked the bottle toward the boy.

"Have a drink. It will put red blood in you." Anton seemed to find the remark funny. He gave a grunting laugh that had the quality of a giggle. His eyes were wild and excited and streaked with red.

Tito didn't like the way he looked. He'd seen men like Anton look at the fat, cheap girls who played the bars like that. And from skylights and fire escape, he'd heard the girl's curse about the things some men did to them.

Tito muttered, "I don't drink that stuff. I come up to make that other buck."

Anton's eyes flared and his heavy mouth twitched. "Maybe you damn well make it the way I tell you and I tell you, drink or maybe you damn well get what Pepe got!"

Tito's blood turned to ice. Panic coarsed through him like sheets of ice cold rain. So here it was—THE MONSTER that he'd been so brave about when he'd organized the Midget Pythons. Now he didn't feel brave at all. He felt congealed with terror. Against that, there was only desperation.

He could see Anton watching him, a vicious smile playing around his sullen mouth. "So maybe you think twice now about having a drink with Anton?"

Tito gulped and squeaked, "Maybe. But first I got to see how much junk there is to clean up."

He whipped around and bolted for the corner roof. If he could just stall Anton a few minutes—if he could just get that secret whistle to his little sister to pass along to the other Midgets—and if—the Blessed Virgin help him and he would give her every dime he could ever steal—the Midgets hadn't forgotten, or think it was the same old game again—

Behind him, Anton was barking with a snarl, but Tito took the last coping in a vault, knowing exactly where he would drop on that lower roof. A few seconds at most he'd be out of Anton's sight. He must not let Anton figure what he was up to.

He leaped toward the front of the building and threw himself flat, leaning over the raised coping. Angela, bless her, was still talking with another girl on the corner below where he had left her. He gave his secret whistle and saw her look up and grin and make the secret sign.

Agony filled him. She thought he was making the same old game again! Tito prayed in that second—prayed as he had never prayed—with the intensity of despair.

Suddenly his sister's upturned face went pale with terror. For an instant, she began to tremble as if she would freeze with fright, but then her little fingers lifted to her

lips. He heard the echo of her whistle flatten out along the street. It was the whistle calling for instant help, the hardest one he'd had to teach her.

He jumped erect and raced back beneath the angle of the dividing wall. Due to some perversity of law, no fire escape reached this roof. The best he could do was try to bluff things out with the hope that somehow, he could bolt past the waiting Anton.

The frayed rope that had given access to the next high roof lay at the foot of that wall. He scooped it up and was coiling it with an attempt at nonchalance when Anton's burly figure loomed beyond the other dividing wall.

His face was livid with brute fury. But his suspicions gave way to cunning as he saw that Tito was making no effort to get off the roof or to call down below. He said gruffly, "I give you better rope. That rope is rotten."

"It's been sawed," Tito mumbled. "Some other gang's playing smart with us."

Anton stooped and leaned on the coping up above. "Here, I give you a hand up."

Tito managed a derisive snort to cover his intentions. "Hell, I don't need no hand to get up there! Watch, I'll show you."

He took a running start, raced up a ventilator slope and over the top. From that slant, he vaulted over the coping of the next building.

It was something that he had done a hundred times. The rush should have carried him past Anton's reach. Maybe cold terror made him miscalculate the jump, or maybe Anton himself moved faster than it seemed he could. His big hand snagged Tito's ankle in a grip like a vice. He raked the boy back across the rough roof like a rag doll, holding him pinned and breathless under his heavy muscled body.

"Ha!" he growled with satisfaction. "You make like a wise guy to outsmart old Anton, huh? You think you get away and tell the police that maybe Anton kill that little bastard Pepe, huh?"

His heavy fingers dug into Tito like blunt talons. He was spitting with the excitement of his mounting sadistic fury. "But now maybe Anton show you something, huh? Maybe he show you just how Pepe died."

Tito couldn't holler for the crushing weight of Anton's body, but he wriggled like a snake with desperation. Three times he thought he'd won free, but each time Anton's vice-like hand hauled him back and he knuckled the boy cruelly while growling his gloating, crazy laugh.

Maybe he was just playing cat-and-mouse, Tito thought, as utter despair overwhelmed him. He was scraped raw and bloody from the roof already. His whole torso was sore from Anton's kneading. Anton was just beginning—for now he was pinching and twisting chunks of Tito's thin flesh. And that crazy

laugh was grunting out of him with wilder and more vicious excitement at Tito's gasps of pain.

Maybe it was lucky that he was having so much vicious fun. He didn't hear or see the roof door open to spew out a tide of Midgets until they landed on him like a cloud of shrill yelling gnats. Angela fastened her sharp little teeth into his ear.

He gave a roar of surprise and shook himself. Angela sailed off his back onto the lower roof, but taking a good bite of his ear. He batted his way free of the pile and tried to rise, but their squirming numbers tripped him. Finally he rose up bellowing with rage, lifting Tito overhead and stepped back to hurl him at the wriggling mass of small fry.

Tito was spreadeagled by the movement. Then it penetrated his blurred mind that little Angela was right below, reaching up from the ventilator.

He dropped his arms and caught her hands. She jerked. Anton had one leg blocked against the dividing wall. He tumbled backward, dropping Tito as he fell, but his head struck the corner of the ventilator and the two kids slithered down the slope to land atop of him as he lay still.

Mulvaney, the Youth cop, came pounding from the open door, shouting ahead of him, "What kind of a rumble's going on here?"

He arrived at the dividing wall to stare down at it with startlement, for every Midget who hadn't been

hurt beyond further action was piled atop Anton getting in kicks and pinches where they could.

Mulvaney called down, "Who is it?"

Tito looked up with a puffed and bloody grin and gasped, "The Monster, I guess—he said he killed Pepe Valdez. He still owes me another dollar, too."

Mulvaney shook his head at his

partner and chuckled, "Me, I'm getting off the Youth Squad before these Midgets get any bigger! There isn't too much left of Anton to take in!"

"Well, don't you go forgetting he still owes me that other buck!" Tito piped. "It's not my fault he didn't give me a chance to clean up."

"Looks to me like you cleaned up pretty good," Mulvaney said.



• XIP-B-B-1111 I'VE BEEN ACQUITTED! •

AN UNUSUALLY GRIPPING SUSPENSE NOVELET



The Men in Aunt Annabel's Life

*A pleasant cottage garden can hold some
extremely gruesome secrets . . . when a
dastardly crime has fallen just short of
execution and an old head turns shrewd.*

by **RICHARD DEMING**

WHEN BIG JOE Harrow let the thin man with the briefcase into the hotel room, the man didn't even say hello. Moving past Harrow, the thin man threw a curt nod to Artie Cannon, whose lanky form was sprawled on the bed, then proceeded to search the room.

He looked behind the window drapes, behind the single picture

on the wall, peered behind the radiator, examined the two lamps and finally climbed on a chair to gaze into the hanging bowl of the ceiling chandelier.

Big Joe Harrow watched the performance with a kind of dull-witted puzzlement, Artie Cannon with bored amusement. When the man climbed down from the chair,

Cannon said, "We could have told you the place ain't wired for sound."

"Merely a routine precaution," the visitor said in a precise voice containing a slight foreign accent. "It has been nearly a month since our last contact. You could easily have had a change of heart and have gone running to the Secret Service."

Artie Cannon looked at the man in amazement. "Us sell out to the Secret Service? What the hell for?"

The thin man shrugged. "In my experience, even the most depraved criminal sometimes retains a feeling of patriotism."

Cannon's face darkened. Swinging his long legs over the side of the bed, he sat up. "I'll give you depraved criminal. You looking for a fat lip?"

Big Joe Harrow raised a hand the size of a meat platter in a placating gesture. "He didn't mean nothing, Artie." To the man he said reproachfully, "You shouldn't ought to talk like that to Artie."

"I apologize," the thin man said in a sardonic tone.

For a moment or two Cannon continued to glare at him, then decided to forget it. With a mixture of belligerence and defensiveness, Cannon said, "What's patriotism got to do with it? The country won't fall apart. The Vice-President will step into his shoes as soon as Joey pulls the trigger.

Things will go on just like before."

The thin man smiled a thin smile. Seating himself in a chair, holding the briefcase in his lap, he said in his precise voice, "I am not really worried about your patriotism. I simply am a cautious man. You cannot afford to double-cross me, of course. My organization never forgives treachery, and you aren't protected by the Secret Service."

Cannon made a dismissing gesture. Big Joe said, "We ain't going to cross nobody. Providing we get paid." His gaze settled on the briefcase.

"You will be paid according to the agreed terms," the thin man assured him. "Half now, half on completion of the assignment. Half now, that is, if you can satisfy me as to the feasibility of your plan."

"We got a foolproof plan," Cannon said. "We center our sights on him on the rear platform of his railroad car at one of the whistle stops."

The thin man frowned. "You couldn't get a gun within a hundred yards of him during this campaign tour. The Secret Service has a copyrighted trick of smelling gun-metal in a crowd."

"Not at four hundred yards, they can't," Cannon said smugly. "We've got a spot picked where we can reach him at four hundred yards with a high-powered rifle."

"Four hundred! Far too risky. Almost certainly you would miss."

Cannon's angular face split in a ferrety grin. "Not Big Joe. We use a German-made sniper's rifle with a telescopic sight and a fixed mount. With the equipment we got, Big Joe can even pick the shirt button he wants at four hundred yards."

The thin man said dubiously, "A fixed mount will require advance setting up. And the Secret Service checks out every possible place along the President's route which might conceal an assassin. They are certain to search any building which gives an unobstructed view of his railroad-car platform at any stop."

"Sure," Cannon agreed. "But we've got that licked. Want to hear the details?"

"That's why I'm here," the thin man said.

Artie Cannon lit a cigarette before beginning. When he had it going and had disposed of the match by dropping it on the floor, he said, "The President's whistle-stop schedule hadn't been released to the press when we started planning this. But the general route he meant to take has been in the papers for a month. I figured he was almost certain to stop at Red Tree, because that's the county seat in a depressed farm area. And he's making a big play for the small farmer's vote.

"I guessed right, because the schedule was in today's paper. He

makes a ten-minute speech from his railroad car platform at Red Tree on the afternoon of Wednesday, October twenty-fifth."

The thin man produced a wallet, drew out of it a small card calendar and looked at it. "That's only four days from now."

"Sure. But the advance planning is all done. We're set to start moving tonight. You know where Red Tree is?"

The thin man shook his head. "Down in the Ozarks," the other said. "The town's built spang between a couple of small mountains. Up on one mountain, just four hundred yards from the depot, is a house where a little old lady named Annabel Drake lives all alone. A gravel road which passes her place circles the mountain and comes out on the other side onto a main highway. We can be five miles away before cops get halfway up the mountainside. Annabel has a guest room on the second floor with a big dormer window. The window looks right down on the depot."

"Exactly the sort of place the Secret Service would go over with a fine-tooth comb," the thin man objected. "Any newly-acquired guests would automatically be pulled in for questioning and released again only after the train had passed through."

"Not a visiting relative."

The thin man raised narrow eyebrows. "I beg your pardon?"

"Big Joe spent four days down there pretending to fish the trout streams. The area is full of them. He did a real research project on the old lady. It's a gossip community, and she's the sort of eccentric people gossip about. He got her past history clear back to birth."

The thin man threw a dubious glance at Big Joe.

"Don't let that dumb expression fool you," Cannon reassured him. "Joe don't think very fast, but he knows how to gather information. People open up to him because he's big and dumb and good-natured. And he's got the memory of an elephant. Tell him about Annabel, Joe."

Big Joe cleared his throat, gazed at the ceiling and began to recite in the sing-song voice of a school boy who has memorized a lesson, "She's seventy years old and has lived all her life in the house on the hill. She had a younger sister named Mary, but no brothers. Her father was a mean old guy who chased off every man who came calling on the girls. When she was twenty-five, Mary ran off to New York with a traveling salesman named Titus Link. Old Jonas Stewart—the girls' maiden name was Stewart—disowned Mary and her name was never again mentioned in the house as long as Jonas was alive."

He paused an instant, then went on confidently. "Annabel's mother

died about a year after that, and Annabel was left as her father's housekeeper. When Annabel was forty, the old man suddenly died of a heart attack, leaving Annabel all alone. She hired a detective agency to locate her younger sister. They traced her as far as New York and reported that some years back she had given birth to a baby boy and then had been deserted by Titus Link. I guess the two had never been married, just lived together. The agency found that she had moved to California with the baby, but they never could locate her out there."

Big Joe fell silent and the thin man glanced at Artie Cannon with a puzzled frown. "Is all this background necessary to your plan?"

"Some of it," Cannon said. "You'll have to take the chaff with the wheat, because Joe's got total recall and he don't know how to edit. Go on, Joe."

Gazing at the ceiling again, Big Joe said, "When she was forty-five Annabel met a drummer named John Drake, who was passing through town. Her dad had left her a wad of money, and I guess he thought she'd make a pretty good deal. He kind of swept her off her feet, and two weeks after they met they was married. He turned out to be a drunk. Folks around there old enough to remember say he made her life hell, all the time getting drunk

and beating her up. Then one night after they'd been married about a year, he just up and disappeared.

"Most people think he run off with a young farm girl named Minnie Small, who took off for parts unknown about the same time. Anyway, he never came back to Annabel. The desertion, on top of the lousy life she'd had with her father and then with her husband, was kind of a last straw. It turned her a little balmy. All of a sudden she got on this kick about finding her sister."

Big Joe paused and wrinkled his forehead. "There's some kind of name for it. A head shrinker's word."

"Obsession?" the thin man suggested.

"That's it. She got an obsession about locating Mary. She spent a lot of money on private eyes and she started advertising in personal columns all over the country. She's still advertising. She's been doing it for twenty-five years. Folks say she gets letters in answer to the ads every so often, but always from crackpots or people who are just curious. She never has located the sister."

Big Joe lowered his gaze from the ceiling. That seemed to be the end of his report. The thin man glanced at Artie Cannon.

"The only thing he left out was that Mary named the baby after its father," Cannon said. "He'd

be thirty-eight now. I'm thirty-seven, but who could tell a year's difference in age? I'm going to be Titus Link Jr. and I'm going to visit my Aunt Annabel to describe how my poor mother died. I've already written her that I saw one of her ads and she can expect me the day after tomorrow. Naturally she'll want me to stay as a guest for a while."

After thinking this over, the thin man gave a slow nod. "It sounds like a very good plan. But how do you get Big Joe in?"

"I won't need him until just before the train pulls in. I can set up the equipment, so that all he'll have to do is step in the room and line up his sights. He's going down to Red Tree to do some more fishing. I'll casually meet him in a bar in town and invite him to drop in and see me some time. I'll mention the invitation to my aunt, of course. He'll drop in about a half hour before the train is due."

The thin man nodded again, this time more decisively. "It should work. I guess you've earned the first half of your fee."

Rising, he crossed to the bed, opened the briefcase and began stacking currency in neat piles next to Arthur Cannon.

II

ANNABEL DRAKE was a plump, smooth-skinned woman with soft, snow-white hair surrounding her

round face. A long-sleeved, high-necked dress with lace at the throat and wrists gave her a nineteenth century appearance. At first glance she seemed to have a rather amiable expression, but you quickly realized it was tempered by the withdrawn manner of a semi-recluse.

She received Artie Cannon with a peculiar mixture of eagerness and reserve. When he announced that he was Titus Link Jr., she stood staring at him with a strange half smile for some time, then shyly invited him in.

Cannon carried his long, heavy suitcase into the entry hall and set it down. For a moment Annabel stared at the suitcase without comprehension, then suddenly seemed to realize that her newly-found nephew planned to stay at least overnight. The realization startled her, for she gazed at him wide-eyed.

It wasn't exactly a welcoming expression, Cannon thought. He would have to soften the old girl up.

Annabel said in a timid voice, "Come sit and tell me about your mother, Titus."

She fluttered into the front room and seated herself in the center of a massive sofa. The room was furnished in mid-Victorian style, the furniture all huge and ornately carved, cherubs and hearts being the ostentatiously prevailing motif.

Cannon seated himself in an easy chair decorated with lace doilies and gazed around a trifle uncomfortably.

It was the aura of old-fashioned respectability, both about the home and the woman, which made him uncomfortable. Ordinarily Artie Cannon was completely assured with women. But his total experience with the opposite sex consisted of floozies he had picked up in barrooms. Annabel made him feel like a peasant who had inadvertently stumbled into the halls of aristocracy. It left him tongue-tied.

He would have to watch his language, he thought. Profanity would probably horrify her.

After a period of dead silence, during which the woman gazed at him expectantly, she finally said, "Your letter mentioned that Mary was dead, but you didn't give details. Was it long ago?"

"Nearly twenty-five years," Cannon said. "I was only thirteen. She died of a heart attack. I guess weak hearts run in the family."

Annabel raised her eyebrows. "Why do you say that?"

"Didn't grandpa die of one?"

For a few moments the woman merely stared at him. Then she asked in a rather flat voice, "Now how would you know that, Titus? Your mother was never informed, because I couldn't locate her."

The old girl was too sharp, Cannon thought with discomfort. He

would have to be more careful.

After a slight hesitation, he said, "I took the bus here from Little Rock. That's as close as I could get by plane. I got in conversation on the bus with a Red Tree native. He told me his name, but I've forgotten. When he learned you were my aunt, he gave me a rundown on the family history."

"Oh," Annabel said. "Well, tell me more of your mother. Where did the two of you go from New York?"

"Los Angeles. My dad walked out on her when I was a baby, you know, and we never saw him again. She worked at a lot of jobs. Sales clerk mostly. We got along okay until I graduated from grammar school. Then she had this heart attack and died."

"What happened to you then?"

Cannon didn't possess an extensive imagination. He drew on his own early life instead of improvising a fictional one for the mythical Titus Link Jr. This was easier, since he himself had been orphaned at thirteen.

"The county put me in a foster home. A half dozen different ones, as a matter of fact. People would take me for the money, then after a while get tired of having a kid around who wasn't theirs. So they'd ask the social worker to find another home and shunt me off. I never got on very good with any of them."



Annabel gave a sympathetic little cluck.

"I managed to make it through high school," Cannon went on, now forced to improvise because his real record after the foster home period would have thrown the old lady into a faint. "I was eighteen by then and on my own. I hung around L.A. a few years, then moved to New York and tied up with the company I work for now."

"Oh? What do you do, Titus?"

"I'm a traveling salesman."

The old woman's expression of polite interest faded, and for a moment her face looked pinched. But it cleared again almost instantly. "What do you sell?"

This was easy, because Cannon had rehearsed it. "Optical equipment. Everything from micro-

scopes to telescopes. Telescopes are my hobby. I'm kind of an amateur astronomer. I carry one around with me all the time to watch the stars at night. Will you mind if I set it up while I'm here?"

Annabel's expression grew thoughtful. Without much enthusiasm she asked, "Were you planning on staying for a time?"

"About a week, I thought. I came a thousand miles to see you."

"Yes, that's true," she admitted. After a moment she added belatedly, "You're entirely welcome, of course."

"I've been meaning to look you up for years, Aunt Annabel. Mother told me all about you and grandpa and grandma when I was a kid. I knew the old man wouldn't want any part of me after disowning Mom, but I figured he must be long dead. You keep putting things off, though. If I hadn't seen your ad, I probably still wouldn't be here."

"I was thrilled to hear from you, Titus." Wistfully she looked off into space. "Grieved, too, of course, to learn of my dear sister's death. In a way I'm glad you waited so long."

"You are?" he asked in a slightly offended voice.

"Oh, I don't mean I'm not glad to see you," she said quickly. "But for years my sustaining thought has been to find your dear

mother. It was all I really lived for. Now the search is over once and for all, and it really doesn't leave me much. Silence at least left me the hope that some day I'd find her."

"I see," he said awkwardly, surprised to feel a touch of guilt.

Annabel rose from the sofa and her manner suddenly turned brisk. "You'll want to get settled and wash up after your long trip. Come, I'll show you your room."

She led the way back into the hall. Picking up his heavy suitcase, Cannon followed her up the stairs. Off a center hall at the top of the stairs doors led into four bedrooms and a bath. The door to the room with the dormer window facing the depot was open, but Annabel moved toward one of the rear bedrooms.

Cannon said in a deferential tone, "I don't mean to be pushy, Aunt Annabel, but is this room in use?" He nodded toward the open door.

"No," she said in a faint surprise. "None of them are. I use the downstairs bedroom. But I was going to give you father's old room. It's the nicest."

"I just happened to notice that dormer window. It would be perfect for my telescope. If it doesn't make any difference to you."

The woman lifted her shoulders in a reserved shrug. "As you please, Titus."

Turning, she led the way into

the front room. It was a huge room with a fireplace in one wall. The furniture was of the same period as downstairs. The bed, ornately carved, had a back which towered nearly to the ceiling. The marble-topped dresser had a mirror as tall as the bed.

Annabel said, "I'll leave you to get settled, Titus. I dine at six sharp. That gives you more than an hour."

"Sure, Aunt Annabel. I'll be down on time."

The woman fluttered out. Cannon closed the door, locked it and heaved his suitcase up on the bed.

The suitcase contained very little in the way of clothing. Cannon lifted out a rifle stock, then a deadly-looking barrel with an attached telescopic sight. At the front end of the wooden stock a small hole had been bored, and a round metal shaft had been pushed completely through the opening and protruded about an inch on each side.

Laying the disassembled gun aside, Cannon lifted out a collapsed telescope and set it on the bed beside the gun. Next from the suitcase came three flat metal disks with screw holes in them and with shallow circular sockets welded on top of them. He carried the disks over to the dormer window.

Glancing down the mountain-side, he saw with satisfaction that

the window gave a perfect view of the depot down below.

The bedroom floor was carpeted, but the carpet didn't extend into the dormer recess. Cannon lay the three disks on the bare wood and carefully adjusted them to the position he wanted. Returning to the suitcase, he took out a small box of screws and a screw driver.

Annabel probably won't notice the screws, he thought, as he screwed the disks firmly to the floor. And he had no intention of calling her attention to them.

Next he lifted a half dozen lengths of light metal tubing from the suitcase and screwed them together to make three pipes about four-and-a-half-feet-long each. He inserted one end of each pipe into the sockets on top of the floor disks. The sockets slanted slightly inward, so that the top ends of the pipes nearly came together. The top ends of the pipes were shoved into holes drilled in the underside of a revolving cradle.

When he had tightened some set screws in the cradle to lock the ends of the pipes firmly into place, he had a solid, immovable tripod four-and-a-half-feet high.

Assembling the rifle, Cannon carried it to the window and fitted the ends of the metal shaft protruding from each side of the stock into slots in the top of the cradle. When he had snapped into place metal lock plates over the

slots, the rifle was perfectly balanced at its center of gravity. The revolving cradle allowed it to be moved 360 degrees in azimuth, and the metal shaft through the stock allowed the muzzle to be elevated nearly straight up or depressed almost straight down.

Without opening the window, Cannon sighted the rifle at the depot down below. Through the powerful telescopic sight he could clearly make out the features of an old man wearing an eyeshade who was seated at an outdoor ticket window. He centered the cross-hairs between the old man's eyes, held steady for a moment, then straightened with a grunt of satisfaction.

Removing the rifle from its cradle, he disassembled it again. He was about to replace it in the suitcase when his eye fell on the marble-topped dresser. A thoughtful expression touched his face.

As a boy there had been a similar dresser in his room at one of the foster homes. He remembered the thrill the day he had discovered that the six-inch strip of paneling beneath the bottom drawer was the front of a hidden drawer which could be opened by pulling from underneath. He had always assumed that the original owner of the dresser had ordered special construction to include the secret drawer, but this dresser had an identical six-inch strip of paneling at the bottom across the front. It

was possible that secret drawers had been a common design during mid-Victorian days.

Crossing to the dresser, he knelt and reached underneath the front. There was a momentary resistance when he pulled forward, then the drawer pulled out with a protesting squeak. It was six inches deep and the full width of the dresser. And it was empty.

Cannon contemplated a routine visit to the house by Secret Service agents a few hours before the arrival of the presidential train. He didn't contemplate that it would be searched, but there was always that remote chance. The rifle would be much safer in the secret drawer than in his suitcase.

One last bit of preparation was necessary. Pulling the telescope out to its full four-foot length, he snapped a light metal clamp about its center. Protruding from each side of the clamp was a round metal shaft similar to the shaft inserted through the hole drilled in the rifle stock. When the telescope had been fitted into place on the cradle, the tripod had a completely innocuous appearance.

Cannon unlocked the bedroom door and crossed the hall to the bathroom to wash up for dinner.

III

THE EVENING MEAL wasn't very substantial. Accustomed to dining frugally and alone, Annabel had

cooked only one chop each, one small potato each and a couple of spoonfuls of peas. Cannon appeased his appetite with bread and butter, which fortunately was in plentiful supply. Annabel had baked lots of fresh bread early that morning.

Dinner conversation about exhausted the subject of Annabel's sister Mary. Cannon got the impression that learning her sister had been dead during all the years she had searched for her was such a letdown to Annabel, her interest in the dead woman was now merely polite.

After all, there was not a great deal he could be expected to tell about a woman who had been dead for twenty-five years. He answered each question with the first lie he could think of, and was beginning to run out of lies when the old lady finally ran out of questions.

There was a conversational lapse when they moved to the front room for coffee. Cannon had never been so uncomfortable in his life. He would have been more at ease if he had an assignment to kill Annabel, for that would have totally changed their relationship.

The sense of power he always felt in such circumstances would have given him a feeling of superiority. But, planning the woman no harm, he was faced with meeting her on a common level. And her air of breeding, her obvious

culture, made him feel that he was a social inferior. Just the effort of choosing his words so as not to embarrass himself by making grammatical errors, or, worse still, accidentally letting slip some profanity, was an ordeal.

After an unendurable period of silence, Cannon made an attempt to revive the conversation.

"I've told you all about my mother and myself," he said. "Suppose we talk about you for a change, Aunt Annabel. What have you been doing all these years?"

"Just vegetating, Titus. I've had a rather dull life." There was a long pause before she added in a tone of afterthought, "Except for one year. I was married for a time."

"I know. The guy I met on the bus told me. John Drake, wasn't it? That would make him my Uncle John."

Annabel nodded. "We were only together for a year."

Conversation died again. Desperately Cannon searched for something more to say. When no other subject came to him, he pursued the same one.

He blurted, "From what the guy on the bus said, he wasn't much of a bargain. Used to get drunk and beat you up, didn't he?"

The instant the words were out, he wished he could recall them. In Cannon's social group bluntness

was accepted as a matter of course. If some guy you knew appeared at the tavern with a purple eye, you didn't try to be delicate about it. You asked, "Your old man get drunk and clout you again?" But he sensed that you weren't supposed to comment on such things in Annabel's world.

The woman flushed, but she didn't seem offended. After a moment she said in a low voice, "He destroyed my love the first month we were married. By the end of a year he had destroyed my liking for all men."

Cannon managed a difficult smile. "Oh, come now, Aunt Annabel. You're not a man hater."

"Certainly I am." She added quickly, "With exeptions, of course, Titus. I hardly include you, because you're kin. But as a general rule I haven't much use for the male sex. Why should I? The only two men in my life were utter beasts."

"Grandpa was a beast too?" Cannon asked with raised brows.

"Oh he didn't beat me in drunken rages, Titus. But he was a tyrant. If he hadn't died when he did, I might have had to spend another twenty years as his servant. That's all I was, and all my mother was before me. Servants and prisoners. He was only sixty-five when he died, you know."

Cannon attempted a joke. "Maybe you helped him along, huh?"

Annabel gave him a sharp glance.

"Just kidding," Cannon said quickly. In a floundering effort to change the subject, he said, "Uncle John took off with some dame, didn't he?"

"A young girl named Minnie Small ran away about the same time," Annabel said a trifle coldly. "It was generally assumed they eloped together. I never instituted any inquiries. I was glad to see the last of him."

"Ever heard from him again?"

She shook her head.

"It's surprising the authorities didn't give you a bad time," Cannon said conversationally. "I mean, the guy just up and disappearing, and only your word that he'd run off. I should think the sheriff would have been up here with a spade, digging into your garden."

Annabel's face underwent a change. It became very still. She gazed at Cannon unwinkingly, a hint of fright in her eyes.

For an instant Cannon was merely puzzled, then enlightenment hit him. And with it his feeling of social inferiority dropped away and he was suddenly Annabel's equal. A little more than a mere equal, for all at once he had the power of secret knowledge.

"I'll be doggoned," he said softly. "You did do him in. And all these years nobody's so much as suspected it, until I try to make

polite conversation. You don't know how lucky you are. If anybody had even so much as asked you about it, you'd have been caught. You've got about the worst poker face I ever saw."

"You're not being very funny, Titus," she said in a stiff voice. "I really don't appreciate that type of teasing."

But her face belied her words. She was dead pale and looked as though she were on the verge of fainting.

Cannon gave her her ferrety grin. Totally at ease now, he was beginning to enjoy the situation. In addition to placing them on the equal social footing of killer to killer, his new knowledge gave him an unforeseen advantage. If the old girl decided to make trouble at the last minute, when she realized what he and Big Joe were up to, he had the lever to shut her up fast and thoroughly.

"I won't tell anybody, Aunt Annabel," he assured her in a sardonic tone. "And I'm not the kind of nephew who goes in for blackmail. At least not much."

"Blackmail!" she said faintly, staring at him in horror. "You can't mean—"

"Just kidding," he said. "Let's drop the subject, if it upsets you so much." Then, in his new-found feeling of equality with the old lady, he made a suggestion he wouldn't have dared make five minutes before. "I'm thirsty. Got



anything to drink around here? With alcohol in it, I mean."

It took an effort for her to adjust to the change of subject. After staring at him blankly for a moment, she said, "Only some home-made dandelion wine. I'll open a bottle."

Rising, she moved in the direction of the kitchen at a stumbling totter.

IV

BIG JOE HARROW arrived in Red Tree the morning of Monday, October twenty-third, several hours before Artie Cannon appeared at his supposed aunt's home. Checking into the local hotel under the name of Harold Martin, he donned fishing clothes, climbed into the car he had rented in Little Rock and drove off to visit a stream.

He didn't care much for fishing, but his partner had instructed him to make a convincing show of being a fisherman in order to avoid suspicion, and Big Joe always followed Artie Cannon's instructions to the letter.

Plans were for Big Joe and Cannon to meet casually in the hotel barroom on Tuesday morning. Big Joe lounged at the bar all day, but his partner failed to appear.

About noon the bartender said in a jocular tone, "You won't catch much fish in here, Mr. Martin."

Big Joe muttered something about not feeling well enough to go out fishing that day.

At five P.M. he gave up his vigil at the bar in order to have dinner. He wasn't really worried about Cannon not showing up, for during the day he overheard a bar customer casually remark that old Mrs. Drake up on the hill had a newhew visiting her, so he knew that his partner had arrived in town. He assumed that for some reason Cannon hadn't been able to break away from the old lady as yet.

After dinner he returned to the bar and sat there all evening. Cannon still failed to appear. Big Joe went to bed puzzled and was back on the same bar stool at nine the next morning. By noon he was seriously worried.

Big Joe wasn't accustomed to

thinking for himself, but when 2:00 P.M. came with no sign of his partner, he was forced to take action. The presidential train was due at 2:30.

Climbing into his rented car, he drove up the winding mountain road to old Mrs. Drake's home. He backed into the driveway, so as to be headed the right way in case sudden departure seemed advisable. There was already an ancient Dodge sedan in the driveway, and he assumed this was the old lady's means of transportation.

A plump, amiable-looking woman of about seventy was spading a garden alongside the house. She wore an old-fashioned dress decorated with lace, a bit frilly for gardening, but she had a kitchen apron over it to protect it from stains.

When Big Joe approached, she gave a final pat to a lumpy plot of ground she seemed to have been smoothing down, leaned on her spade and looked at him inquiringly.

Big Joe removed his hat. "You Mrs. Drake, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes," she said with a smile. "Are you another Secret Service man?"

Big Joe experienced a slight chill. "Have they been here?"

"About an hour ago. Just to make a routine check of the house. The President is due in on a train before long, you know, and it seems they check all nearby

houses. They stayed hardly more than a minute or two."

"Did they—eh—find anything out of the way? I mean, did they arrest anybody or anything?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Who could they arrest? There isn't anyone here but me."

Big Joe thought things over for a few moments. Then he said tentatively, "How about your nephew? Wasn't he around?"

The question seemed to startle her. She asked warily, "Do you know my nephew?"

"Sure. He invited me to drop in and see him. Where is he?"

"I'm afraid you're too late. He went back to New York yesterday."

Big Joe stared at her blankly. Annabel Drake stared back with a fixed smile on her face and a hint of fright in her eyes. Big Joe was a slow thinker, but he had enough intelligence to realize from the woman's expression that something was very wrong. Had Artie been arrested by the Secret Service, he wondered? And then had they set her out here as bait in case any of Artie's associates came along?

He glanced around in all directions. The house looked empty. There was nowhere on the bare mountainside where police might be concealed. Besides, he had a sixth sense which always told him when he was under observation, and he didn't feel watched now.

He said slowly, "I don't think he'd do that, ma'am. He wouldn't just go off without letting me know."

"Oh, but he did," she insisted. "He works for a big optical glass firm in New York City, and he had to get right back. He only stayed one night."

Big Joe stared at her for a time more. She had grown quite pale, he noted. She would be a sucker in a poker game, because her face would reflect exactly the type of hand she had.

He asked cautiously, "Did somebody come after Artie—I mean Titus?"

She shook her head. "I drove him to the bus station myself."

This was such an obvious lie, Big Joe could think of nothing to say for a moment. Finally he asked, "Mind if I look around the house?"

"Whatever for?"

He tired of the give and take. Glancing around again and seeing no one, he grasped her arm in one big hand. In a definite tone he said, "Don't give me no trouble, ma'am, and you won't get hurt. But we're going in that house. You hear?"

She emitted a little gasp, but she made no resistance. Releasing the handle of the shovel, she let it fall to the ground. Gently but inexorably Big Joe guided her across the lawn to the front door.

The sound of an approaching

train came to them as they stepped inside.

Inside he released his grip on her arm. "I don't want to drag you around by the arm, but you stick with me," he admonished. "I don't want you wandering out of sight and making phone calls. You hear?"

"Yes," she said faintly.

Big Joe gestured her up the stairway ahead of him. At the top he motioned her into the room with the big dormer window. He came to an abrupt halt when he saw the telescope on the stand next to the window.

"He wouldn't leave that if he went off under his own power," he said. "Now you better tell me what happened here, lady."

When the woman merely looked at him mutely, he began to search the room. Beneath the bed he found the long suitcase. Pulling it out, he opened it and stared down at the few items of clothing it contained. Then he made a thorough search of the room, pulling open dresser drawers, examining the closet, even looking under the bed mattress.

"All right," he said, giving up. "Where's the gun?"

"Gun?" she repeated in an unsteady, puzzled voice.

The puzzlement sounded genuine to Big Joe. Apparently she knew nothing of the gun. But he was sure she knew what had happened to Artie Cannon.

Marching over to the window, he gazed down the mountainside. The train had come to a halt and a crowd of several hundred people crowded around the rear car on both sides of the track. As he watched, a man on the rear platform made a microphone adjustment, then turned and looked expectantly at the door into the car.

"Damn!" Big Joe said.

Turning from the window, he made another furious search of the room. It wasn't any more successful than the first search.

Balling his fists on his hips, Big Joe glared at Annabel. "Listen, lady," he growled. "You may as well get one thing straight. I'm not leaving here till I know what happened to Artie—Titus. So you better start talking."

Her shoulders slumped and she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief she drew from an apron pocket. Big Joe looked at her in alarm. He couldn't stand crying women.

"Hey," he said. "There's no need to bawl. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to know where my buddy is."

"All right," she said in a tearful voice. "I suppose I'll have to tell you. But it's a rather long story. May we go downstairs where we can sit in comfort?"

Big Joe threw a bitter glance at the window. "Why not? I got all day now."

Downstairs she said, "Would

you like some homemade dandelion wine while we're talking, Mr.—"

"Martin," Big Joe supplied. "Harold Martin."

She gave him a formal nod. "How do you do, Mr. Martin? Would you like some wine? I really feel the need of some myself."

"Okay," Big Joe said impatiently. "Pour it out and get on with your story."

The thin man's eyes narrowed at the woman's sudden paleness. She certainly didn't know how to conceal her emotions, he thought.

She said shakily, "He only visited me one night. Monday. He went back to New York on Tuesday."

The thin man smiled a thin smile. "He didn't stay to take in the President's speech?"

She shook her head. "He had to

Complete in the Next Issue

DEATH WAITS IN THE DARKROOM

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IT WAS TWO days later when another, very thin man said with his slight foreign accent, "Mrs. Drake?"

"Yes?"

"I am looking for your nephew, Titus Link. I understand he's been visiting you."

go back to New York on business."

"Hmm. Do you happen to know a man named Harold Martin?"

Annabel grew even paler. Big Joe had been there too, he thought.

"No, I don't," she said in a cracked voice. "Who is he?"

"He was a guest at the hotel in town. He seems to have disappeared. A car he had rented was found abandoned in the alley behind the pool hall."

She gripped the edge of the door as though holding herself from falling. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I don't know anything about it."

What a poor liar, he thought. Obviously she knew at least something about it. Perhaps she saw them dividing the money they never intended to earn. Any information at all would be important. He had to locate the defectors before his associates located him.

"I'm a federal police officer," he announced, momentarily flashing a wallet card and snapping the wallet shut again before the old lady could get a good look.

"Oh, my!" she said in dismay. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

She looked at him doubtfully. "Are you here to arrest me?"

"Humm," he said. "If you've done something to make you liable to arrest. May I step in while we discuss it?"

She stared at him, stricken. "You didn't come after me at all did you? I've given myself away."

He said patiently, "May I come in?"

"Of course," she said in a resigned voice, stepping aside from the door. "Do you like homemade dandelion wine?"

"I love it," he said to humor her, sensing it would be best to let her go about telling whatever she had to tell in her own way.

He waited in the front room while she went to the kitchen for two glasses of wine.

Annabel's nerves were close to the breaking point and she hoped that digging up the garden for the third time in one week would not prove too great a strain.



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It was the most flawless of back-stage murders . . . except here and there.



SEEING IS BELIEVING

by **NICOLAS BENTLEY**

I HAD THE whole thing dutifully figured out. This was how it was going to happen. How it did happen, in fact, except for the unforeseen accident of Richard's make-up man coming down with influenza at the last moment.

I came in, not through the stage door because Fred, the doorman might have spotted me. I was careful to enter the theatre as a ticket holder, and I went into the small lounge bar in the inner lobby. They were near the beginning of Act IV of Macbeth, with Richard

Milner hamming his way through *I will be satisfied: deny me this*.

I had chosen this particular moment because I knew it would give me time to have a drink, and so establish an alibi for myself with Dorothy Wray to back it up. Dorothy is about fifty, plump and beady-eyed and as shrewd as they come. She has spent the best years of her life in bars, on one side of the mahogany or the other.

We had a drink together and talked for a moment or two, and while we talked I kept my eye on

the clock over the door, having checked my watch against it as I came in.

I had timed the things so carefully and so often from the wings in the past two weeks that I knew almost to a second when Richard's exit speech would begin. That was to be my cue.

For the next thirteen minutes I knew he would be in his dressing room, and tonight, as things had turned out, alone, because of Willy's unforeseen influenza. It meant I would not have to go to the call box outside the stage door.

My plan had been to get rid of Willy by phoning him and informing him with sympathy and urgent concern in my voice that his wife had had an accident and he was wanted at the hospital. I had planned to wait until I had seen him come out of the stage door before going into the bar to alibi myself with Dorothy. When I heard in the morning that Willy was ill, I cancelled that part of the performance.

In the ordinary way I would not have been at the theatre at all on a night when I was not playing. But I had a very special reason tonight, which was, ostensibly, to see the new boy Richard had engaged to play young Macduff. All that I was careful to unload in front of Dorothy Wray.

When I was sure that Richard's exit speech was well under way, I said to her, "Well, it would be a

crime to miss the new prodigy," and went inside.

I waited at the back of the theatre for the applause to end, and then entered the corridor that leads to the lower, left-of-stage boxes, and went through the pass-door on the prompt side.

This was the tricky part because there was always the risk of my running into somebody who would recognize me. But I knew that at this moment, everybody would be either on the opposite side of the wings, or waiting up-stage. As I had only a couple of yards to go to reach the passage leading to the dressing-rooms I decided to risk it.

I could hear Ava Milner, who was playing Lady Macduff, just beginning her scene as I came through the pass door, and in less than ten seconds I was in the passage without anyone having seen me.

I sneaked along and up the stairs to the first floor, and when I got to the top I waited for a second or two to make sure the coast was clear.

I remember wondering in those few seconds whether it was worth it. And then, as one often does at moments of crisis, I could see in a flash things which had taken years to happen.

I saw the dog fight which had been Richard and Ava Milner's married life. I saw his idiotic exhibitions of jealousy and conceit,

his humiliation of her, and his cruelty—the way he threw us together again and again simply for the pleasure that tearing us apart emotionally gave him.

I saw the despicable meanness he displayed toward members of the cast he happened to dislike, and his equally despicable favoritism.

I remembered his cheap and ignominious comments when he had stood in the way of my playing Iago simply because the notices I'd received had been better than his.

I saw all this, and I saw red—not for the first time, but it was a brighter and more brutal red than I had ever seen before.

The first door on the right was Richard's dressing-room. I went straight in. He was behind the screen washing his hands.

He called out, "Who's that?" but I didn't answer. His belt with the dagger in it was lying across a chair. I had worn the same dagger as Rosencrantz, and I knew it had a good sharp point.

I pulled it out of its sheath and went around behind the screen. He was bending over the wash basin as I stabbed him.

He fell over towards me, his shoulders jerking, and I stabbed him twice again, in the side and in the back. He made very little sound.

I washed the blade under the cold tap, then dried it on my

handkerchief, and after I had put it back in the sheath I wiped the handle very carefully.

I took one more look at Richard Milner before I left. As far as I could tell he was dead.

I went out into the passage and shut the door. Then I walked back down the stairs, and went through the pass door, behind the boxes, and returned to the place where I had been standing at the back of the theater. From start to finish not a single soul had even looked in my direction.

Scene II is very short and it was nearly over. I waited for the curtain before returning to the bar.

"He seems to be a promising youngster," I said to Dorothy. "If we do King John he'll have the whole theatre applauding him madly."

We had another drink and I offered her a cigarette. But I had to pretend I'd forgotten my lighter, so that she wouldn't notice how my hand was shaking. I let her light her own, and then she gave me the matches.

She was in a playful mood tonight, and when she picked a long hair off my collar there was some arch speculation about it, which would have grated on me at the best of times, and this was not one of them. I had to grin and bear it, but after five or six minutes I thought it would be safe to leave.

When I got home and was undressing, I discovered two small

things which disconcerted me for a little while.

One was a slight smear of grease paint on my left sleeve: the other was a button on my cuff, which I knew had been all right when I came out but was now hanging by a thread.

Apparently I had caught it on some part of Richard's costume. I sewed it on again before I went to bed, and removed the grease paint from my sleeve by scrubbing it with cleaning fluid.

I might have saved myself the trouble. The whole of the cast and the theatre staff were questioned, of course. When it came to my turn I told them all I had to tell in a couple of minutes. I was careful not to say that Dorothy would be able to back up my story, because I was virtually certain they would check with her, as indeed they did.

But by the time they got round to questioning Dorothy Wray she had been turning things over in her mind and I suppose coming to conclusions of her own. How she came to know or guess about Ava and me, I don't know.

I suppose there was a certain amount of talk backstage, and it may have come to her attention that way. The members of the cast were always all ears for gossip on the sordid side, or gossip that seemed sordid to them, or, at the very least, titillating.

So with the seeds of suspicion

already in her mind, it was probably easy for her to remember things she had noticed at the time, but without attaching any particular significance to them.

The smear of grease paint, for instance, was one thing she had noticed, though she had not said anything to me about it. Also the loose button on my sleeve. She had even remembered it was not loose when I'd talked with her in the bar the first time.

And the match trick had failed too. In spite of it, she had noticed how my hand had been shaking when I'd lit my cigarette, as well as my preoccupation with the time.

None of these things were conclusive, of course, either separately or collectively. But I was in deep water straight off when they questioned me the second time and I had to try to think of plausible explanations on the spur of the moment.

And the hair Dorothy had picked off my collar, which she had idly twisted around a cut-out showcard as we stood there talking—the hair was still there when the police went searching for it.

Even if I had been able to find my way out of the cat's cradle of questions which they had trapped me with already, I could never have found an explanation for how it was that I came to have a hair on my coat which they were able to prove conclusively was a hair from Richard's wig.



(Continued from
other side)

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